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VII.

THE CRIME
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THE OPERA HOUSE.

BY FORTUNÉ DU BOISGOBEY.

IN TWO VOLS.—VOL. I.

FIFTEENTH THOUSAND.

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THE CRIME OF THE OPERA HOUSE.

PART I.



I.

THIS is a story of yesterday.

Julia d'Orcival, the raven-haired Parisian beauty, was half reclining on a settee in a boudoir hung with buttercup silk. A bright fire was glowing in the chimney-place, provided with Louis Seize andirons, on which the tiny feet of the belles of Versailles had rested in days now past ; and a lamp of Japanese porcelain shed a soft light over the padded nest, to which only intimate friends were admitted. No sound was perceptible, save the distant rumble of vehicles passing to and fro on the Boulevard Malesherbes, and the murmur of boiling water singing in a copper *samovar*. And yet Julia was not alone. A young man leant back in a large arm-chair near her, twirling his fair moustache and looking carelessly at one of Clodion's terra-cottas, representing some Bacchantes flirting with fauns. But, to tell the truth, this distinguished-looking cavalier gave no more thought to Clodion's masterpiece than his companion gave to the splendid painting by Fortuny which glowed in front of her, and for which she had paid an extravagant price. If they were silent it was not because they had nothing to say, for they were stealthily watching each other like a couple of duellists before crossing swords. An experienced man of the world would at the first glance have judged that some serious discussion was about to take place, and a playwright would have intuitively scented a dramatic situation.

It was Julia who opened the engagement. "How gloomy you are, Gaston, this evening," she said, pretending to stifle a yawn.

"There are days when I have dismal ideas," was Gaston's reply.

"Why not the vapours, like a pretty woman?"

"It is quite allowable that I should be troubled with the nerves."

"Yes, but when your nerves are irritated it would be charitable not to compel me to shut myself up with you."

"Oh, shut yourself up !"

"Exactly, my dear. You know very well that Monday is my day for the opera, and yet you sent me word this morning that you had resolved to devote your evening to me. I, however, obeyed you without a murmur; I sent my box to Claudine Risler, who, I am afraid, will have taken some ill-bred people there ; I carried my devotion so far as to prepare, with my own white hands, that green tea you like so much ; I had my hair dressed to your taste, although wearing it high hardly suits me ; and then I

awaited your coming, indulging in roseate dreams. But, lack-a-day ! you arrive with as long a face as if you had just come from a funeral. Come, my dear, what is the matter ? If you speculated on 'Change, I should think that you had lost all your fortune between noon and three o'clock this afternoon."

This speech, commenced in a somewhat sharp tone, ended almost affectionately, and Gaston could not take it amiss, still the smile which Julia's soft reproaches brought to his lips was not a frank one. One might have thought that he regretted having missed the opportunity for a quarrel. "You are right," he said ; "I am insupportable, and I deserve to be sent away. But, after all, it is not my fault if the life I lead wearies me."

"Good ! And so now you speak impertinently ?"

"Not at all. I speak of the idle life I lead at clubs, theatres, and race meetings."

"And at Julia d'Orcival's."

"Of the life that my friend Nointel calls 'gardenia life.'" resumed Gaston, paying no attention to Julia's covert attack.

"By the way," said she, "you know that the gardenia is my favourite flower. Was it your same friend Nointel who advised you not to send me a bouquet this evening ?"

"Nointel doesn't give me advice, and if he did I shouldn't follow it."

"Why not ? The handsome captain is a sage who lives happily on his modest income. You should take him for a model ; you need it, I'm afraid, although you possess fully forty thousand francs a year, and will be even twice as rich when your uncle dies. Monsieur Nointel, you know, never grumbles, and he has never been known to engage in anything like a serious intrigue. Imitate him, my dear, since you envy his happiness."

Julia now spoke in a harsh tone, and the words shot from her lips like arrows. She was evidently trying to pique her lover so as to oblige him to reveal his game, and she succeeded.

"My dear girl," said Gaston, "I don't think of imitating any one, but I am twenty-nine years old, and——"

"And you are of opinion that it is time for you to get married."

The young fellow did not reply. A flash came from Julia's large eyes, but her face remained unchanged in expression, and it was with perfect calmness that she continued : "Then you are going to get married ?"

"I ? Never !"

The answer was given so earnestly that it must have been sincere, and Julia at once changed her batteries. "Why don't you get married ?" she softly asked. "You are rich, well born, well allied. Your father held a high position in the judicial world ; your uncle is an investigating magistrate in Paris ; your family belongs to the upper middle classes if not to the nobility. You could easily find an heiress as well dowered by nature as by her parents."

"I repeat that this is not in question."

"It is strange," continued Julia. "The proverb pretends that misfortunes never come singly. Would you believe it, I also am in peril of marriage ?"

"Indeed !" said Gaston, with a somewhat incredulous air.

"Your astonishment isn't polite, by any means, but it doesn't wound me. I know exceedingly well that I haven't taken the road which usually leads to the mayor's office and the church. I might have followed it, for

I was extremely well brought up. I have my certificate of proficiency like any schoolmistress of the State, but I preferred a more flowery path than teaching the young. No doubt, I can't marry a man like you, but nothing prevents me from marrying a foreigner. Prejudices cease at the frontier."

"A foreigner! Do you mean to leave France?"

"Why not? A countess' coronet is worth expatriation, and at this moment it only depends on myself to become a countess."

"In what country?" asked Gaston, with a touch of irony.

"In Poland. You know Count Golymine?"

"The fellow who was black-balled at my club? Yes, certainly, I know him."

"By sight, no doubt, but——"

"By reputation also."

"And his reputation is detestable, is it not?"

"You have said so."

"Well, you know that the count was madly in love with me three years ago——"

"You might have spared me the reminder," interrupted Gaston.

"And that I broke off with him, although he royally spent a very large fortune on me."

"Of which everybody suspected the origin."

"Myself included. Indeed, it was because I suspected Golymine that I left him. But I can now assure you that he was judged too severely. The gold which he scattered by handfuls had been honestly earned in America."

"By gambling?"

"No, in the mines of California."

"I hope it was so."

"And I alone know the true status of this Slav whom all Paris received when he was rich. He is an adventurer; but not a swindler. He has done some things which are certainly blameable, but he has also performed some heroic deeds. I don't know how to define his strange nature. You have read the novels of Cherbuliez, haven't you? Very well, Count Golymine is exactly like Ladislas Bolski and Samuel Brohl."*

"Especially like Samuel Brohl."

"Yes, like Samuel, for he has been loved by a great lady—by more than one. But he also has loved, and he ardently loves——"

"Yourself, no doubt?"

"Yes, me. And he is a man to kill me and kill himself if I refused to marry him. He has written to me to that effect."

"You don't tell me this, I suppose, to induce me to give you my opinion as to what you ought to do?"

"No, for I have decided."

"To do what?"

"Never to see Wenceslas again."

"His name is Wenceslas, then! He's perfect. I congratulate you on your decision, my dear Julia."

"And you think that there is little merit in refusing a tarnished and ruined husband. You are right, for I no longer love him."

"You did love him, then?"

"Why shouldn't I acknowledge it? He is handsome and brave, with

* "Samuel Brohl and Partner." By V. Cherbuliez, in *Vizetelly's Popular French Novels*, 1s.

that audacity, disdain for the opinion of fools, and contempt for danger which please women so much. If he made me a countess, he would know how to impose me upon society. What am I, however? An 'irregular,' and I shouldn't stoop in marrying one of my kind. But I have told you, Gaston, that I no longer love him, and I would let him kill me rather than bind my life to his."

"You are tragical, my dear," muttered the young fellow, wearily. He was evidently displeased with the turn the interview had taken. He had not come to hear Julia talk of love; and as for the Pole she threw at his head, he wished him in nameless subterranean regions; it seemed as if she were trying to prevent the conversation from reaching the point he aimed at. He no longer twirled his moustache, but he gave other and still less equivocal signs of perplexity and impatience. While he was fidgeting on his chair, however, the door of the boudoir opened, and a woman's face discreetly showed itself, the perfect face of an "irregular's" waiting-maid—a sharp nose, sallow complexion, and sarcastic mouth. "What is the matter?" asked Julia sharply. "I haven't rung."

"Madame hasn't rung, no doubt, but I have a word to say to madame," replied the maid, with a confidential air.

"Say it. Why so much mystery? I have no secrets from Monsieur Darcy."

"Forgive me, madame—it is—there is some one who wishes to speak to madame."

"Some one! Who? I forbade your admitting any one."

The woman remained discreetly silent; but Gaston, who sat with his back towards her, saw plainly enough in the mirror that her eyes were talking. "What is the meaning of these looks?" asked Julia d'Orceval. "Is it the count who is there?"

The maid had evidently not foreseen this question. She knew her business, and was not accustomed to announce a dethroned sovereign in presence of the reigning king. However, she was not disconcerted, and, so low that Gaston scarcely heard her, she answered: "Yes, madame, it is the count; but madame may well believe that he entered in spite of me—the valet and the coachman have gone out. I wasn't able, all alone, to prevent him from disregarding my orders and following me as far as the drawing-room."

"Ah! he is in the drawing-room," exclaimed Julia d'Orceval. "Very well, I will go there. Return to my bedroom, and don't stir unless I ring for you."

The maid disappeared noiselessly, as she had entered, and closed the door with precautions that denoted great familiarity with delicate situations. Meanwhile Gaston had risen to his feet. "So it's Count Goly mine?" he said.

"Why, yes," replied Julia. "He wrote to me this morning saying that he wished to see me before leaving France, for he leaves to-morrow. I had sent him word that I wouldn't receive him, but I expected a prank of this kind. It will be the last, however. I wish to finish with him this evening."

"And I—I am going away," said Gaston, with an earnestness that Julia no doubt remarked, for she coldly replied: "If you need a pretext for leaving me, you would have no trouble to find a better one. There is no longer anything between the count and me, and I beg of you to remain here. The interview will be a short one, I promise you, and on my return

"I shall have an explanation with you." And so saying, she left the room without giving her lover time to add a single word.

Gaston lacked presence of mind on this occasion, but it must be admitted that he found himself in a difficult position. To detain Julia d'Orcival in spite of herself would have been ridiculous. A man cannot offer violence to a woman. To leave was impossible, for the boudoir had but one exit, and it would be necessary for him to cross the drawing-room where the count was waiting. To pass under the eyes of a rival and relinquish the place to him, or pick a quarrel with this rival and turn him out of doors, such were the two expedients Gaston had to choose from, and he would readily have taken the latter one if he had to deal with a man of his own class. But the prospect of a duel with this adventurer was not agreeable to him, and he hardly cared to break off his connection with Julia with a scene when he wished to do so amicably. For Julia was not mistaken. Gaston Darcy had determined to give her up. With her womanly clairvoyance, she had read his designs in his eyes, and, as she did not wish to be deserted, she at once engaged in a contest which she quite expected to win. The unexpected visit of Golymine had come like a decisive blow at the end of the battle, and she hoped that it would operate in her favour. She knew that to revive expiring love nothing equals rivalry recalled at the right moment, and she had resolved to sacrifice the Pole to assure the continuity of her connection with her Parisian lover.

Gaston, on his side, however, was thinking to himself that this unpleasant incident would assure him the advantage when hostilities were resumed. He had reached Julia's house faltering and somewhat embarrassed. He had come there in view of liquidating an association which he had contracted a year before, that is to say, a century in the world of pleasure. He needed a motive for taking this step, and if he knew of a sufficiently serious one it was not Julia d'Orcival who had furnished it. He had foreseen that she would not at all relish the reason he meant to put forward as an excuse for the rupture, and he had feared that he might lack energy at the decisive moment. A false manoeuvre on the part of the dark siren had fortified his assurance, however. In trying to excite his jealousy, she had exposed her weak point. Gaston had forgiven her all her old lovers, excepting Golymine; and in recalling the count, she had committed a blunder which the adventurer's arrival had not calculated to repair. Indeed, Gaston now felt sure of himself. While waiting for Julia's return, he walked restlessly up and down the boudoir, pausing now and then whenever the sound of loud talking reached him from the next room, and then, resuming his agitated walk for fear of being tempted to listen. Gaston asked himself why Julia had not taken her Slav to some other room. The house was large, and she had only to choose. There was a gallery used as a library, so far from the boudoir that a duel might have been fought there without the noise being heard in the coquettish retreat which Julia habitually occupied.

Gaston soon began to think that she wished to compel him almost to be present at her interview with Golymine. He said to himself that she had so arranged it that some significant words might reach his ears, and he finished by believing that all this had been planned in advance between herself and the Pole—in which he was wholly mistaken. The fact is, the conversation soon became much louder, and Gaston would have needed to have been deaf not to have heard some fragments of the dialogue. He plainly distinguished the two voices—Julia's passionate, but feminine;

and the count's deep, thrilling, and tragic. And, in truth, it was indeed a tragedy which was being played at Julia d'Orcival's. She was inclined to make an operetta of it, but the enraged Pole carried matters to the extreme.

"It is infamous!" he exclaimed.

"No big words," she interrupted.

"You wish me to kill myself, then?"

"A man doesn't kill himself for a woman."

"Yes, when he adores her—when he cannot live without her."

Then came couplets in a lower key. The count was evidently trying to soften Julia's resolution, but she steadily answered all his entreaties by refusals. When the duet rose to a high key again, Gaston had to make the greatest efforts to prevent himself from appearing upon the scene and chastising this foreigner, who was ordering Julia to follow him to some out-of-the-way country. And when the conversation subsided to a low key again, Gaston felt enraged at being placed in so ridiculous a position. It is all very well for a man not to love a woman any longer, it is still harder to listen despite one's self to the stormy explanations she has with another admirer, and one experiences a furious desire to interfere.

"Now," grumbled Gaston, to console himself, "I am radically cured."

However, the situation had reached such a point that the finish could not be far distant, and, in fact, it was at hand. Julia did not like delay, and therefore she cut her answers short.

"And so," continued the count, "you are determined not to go with me?"

"Perfectly determined, my dear fellow," answered Julia. And, after a pause, she added: "You will thank me in the future."

"No, for you will never see me again alive."

"Again! You really talk too much about dying. I wasn't alone when you made your entry, *à la Tartare*. So allow me to leave you, and, in spite of your sinister words, I will say to you: Till we meet again—in two or three years time—when you have found another gold mine in California—or elsewhere—I am not particular as to the place of production."

"Go and join your lover," thundered the count in reply. "I despise you too much to kill you, but I curse you—and you will see what the malediction of the dead is worth."

After this melodramatic sentence of the fifth act, a door banged to. The curtain had fallen. The play was finished.

Gaston took but little interest in this Pole, who talked in such a high-flown style; but the cold sarcasms of Julia d'Orcival had nerved him for the contest he contemplated, and he awaited her with due firmness. She came back calm, almost smiling. The scene in the drawing-room had only brought a little more brightness to her eyes and redness to her cheeks.

"At last," she said, "I am rid of that desperado. Mariette did as well to let him come in. Now he will not return again."

"I believe it," said Gaston, coldly.

"Did you listen?"

"Listen? no. Hear—yes—a few words——"

"And do you think that Count Golymine loves me as we women like to be loved—with madness, rage—even to suicide—included?"

"When a man wishes to kill himself he does not proclaim it so loudly."

"But I have already told you, my dear, that you do not know Golymine. He is a lunatic, who would blow up Paris, and himself with it, to satisfy one of his little fancies."

"It matters little to me what he is or what he isn't. I hope I shall never find him again in my path."

"You are right, my friend, I am talking a great deal too much to you about this insurgent, and I beg of you to forgive me the unpleasant moments you have just passed. You might have taken offence at a scene I did not provoke, and you did right to permit me to send my persecutor away. I really owe you my gratitude, and you know that I always pay my debts," said Julia, with a smile which would have broken the ice of an octogenarian heart. "Until I pay this one," she added, "come and let me pour you out a cup of this tea which I received yesterday from Moscow—without passing through Warsaw."

"A thousand thanks," replied Gaston. "But I shall be obliged to leave you at midnight. It is now half-past eleven, and I have something to say to you."

Julia had already reassumed on the lounge the graceful pose which she selected whenever she wished to please; but at these words she started up like a wounded adder and hastily asked: "What have you to say to me?"

"That I have decided to adopt the judicial profession."

"And so as to announce this grave news to me, you have made me miss the opera? Ah! my poor fellow, you will be obliged to wear a black gown, and cut off your moustaches."

"No, not yet. I shall commence as an *attaché* at the office of the public prosecutor. But I shall be obliged to reform my mode of life,"

With a glance as clear and cold as the blade of a sword, Julia d'Orcival interrogated the face of her lover. "Is it a rupture which you propose to me in these gracious terms?" she asked, after a short silence.

"A separation," said the young man, bowing.

"The word is better than your conduct."

Gaston started under the insult, but he controlled himself sufficiently to answer calmly: "You have never believed, I presume, that our connection was to be eternal. I have always acted towards you as a gentleman, but the career I wish to follow compels me to sever the tie, and I know what it will cost me."

"You mean to say that to-morrow you will enclose a cheque in the last bouquet I shall receive. Well, I shall return it to you, my dear. I don't wish for your money without you. What should I do with it? I am rich, and, if it pleases me to give you a successor, I shan't need to take him for his fortune, any more than I took you for yours."

Gaston bowed without replying. The scene with the Pole had rendered him invulnerable either to reproach or flattery.

"It is no doubt your uncle, the investigating magistrate, who has put into your head the virtuous idea of succeeding him some day," continued Julia. "And you dare to pretend that he has not decided you should marry as well. The one does not go without the other."

"You forget that my uncle is a bachelor."

"So much so that you quite expect to inherit his fortune some day. All the more reason, then, why he should be anxious to confide to you the task of perpetuating his name. At the second generation, the Darcys, your descendants, will put an apostrophe after the *d*."

Gaston felt that he was losing patience, and made a movement as if to leave the room.

Julia had risen to her feet, and her eyes were flashing. "My dear," she said, in a voice which hissed between her white teeth, "I know your worth now, and I pity the woman who marries you, unless she treats you as I ought to have treated you. And that is what she certainly will do. You are not of the race of the men who are loved, Monsieur Gaston Darcy." Then, changing her tone all at once, she asked: "Will it be the beautiful Havanese marchioness—the widow with six hundred thousand francs' income, who decks her horses with red ribbons, and drives a four-in-hand better than an English coachman—the Marchioness de Barancos, in fact! I have been told that you were most assiduous in your attentions to her. But you are not the only one, and —"

Darcy could stand it no longer. He abruptly opened the door of the boudoir, ran through the drawing-room, and did not stop till he reached the bottom of the stairs, where he put on his hat and overcoat. Mariette had been consigned to Julia d'Orcival's bedroom. The other servants were enjoying themselves in the kitchen, so he left the house without meeting any one.

While he was striding down the Boulevard Malesherbes, Julia, leaning upon the console which supported the Clodion terra-cotta, soliloquised as follows: "Gone! Yes, he has left me! Fool that I was. I took him for a simpleton, and I imagined that I should some day make him marry me. Why not? Eva became Princess Gloukof, and she commenced worse than I did. Her mother was simply an apple-woman. Yes, but Darcy isn't a Russian. Darcy is a citizen of Paris, inaccessible to allurements. He slips through my fingers just when I thought I held him. It serves me right. It will teach me to aim higher. But some one must have instigated his conduct. I will know who, and I will avenge myself. Yes, I will avenge myself on him, his uncle, and his friend, that Nointe! —" Then, as though illuminated by a sudden inspiration, she continued: "Golymine will help me. He loves me, he does, and recoils before nothing. I wrongly chose my time for dismissing him, still it only depends on me to renew the connection. He is still in Paris, for he didn't fancy I should refuse to follow him, and he was here twenty minutes ago. Suppose I write to him? Yes; but I have forgotten his address—he has changed it so often during the last six months. But it ought to be on the card that he left yesterday when I refused to receive him. Where is that card? Ah! I remember now that Mariette laid it on the buhl table in the centre of the gallery."

With Julia d'Orcival action quickly followed thought, so she started at once for the gallery, which was at the other end of the first floor. As she knew that it was not lighted up, she duly provided herself with a lamp.

On entering the gallery she was greatly surprised to find a lighted candle placed upon a sideboard. The uncertain light of this candle hardly penetrated into the high and deep embrasures of the Gothic windows, before the last of which Julia thought she indistinctly saw a man hiding.

She was not a coward. So she advanced towards this man—who looked as though he was listening at the window—and recognising him by his fur pelisse, she exclaimed: "Golymine! what are you doing here? what means——" And almost immediately she added: "Hanged! He has hanged himself!"

She dropped the light she carried, and her blood froze in her veins. The room was immense. The ceiling was lost in shadow, and the candle, which was almost consumed, but faintly lighted the embrasure with dying glimmers. Complete obscurity would have been less terrible than these intermittent reflections which, by moments, shone upon Golymine's convulsed features, and, at others, barely revealed the hideous outline of his figure hanging by the neck.

Julia recoiled in horror, and remained leaning against the book-case, pale, trembling, her hands clasped, and her eyes dilating. She wished to cry out, but her voice failed her; she wished to fly, but terror held her to the spot; she wished to turn her eyes away from the sight of this hanging body, but she looked at it in spite of herself—it positively fascinated her.

It was certainly Golymine. The enraged Slav had kept his promise, and his last words again rang in Julia d'Orcival's ears: "You will know what the malediction of the dead is worth."

She understood them now, those threatening words; and by a phenomenon of lucidity, due to the excited condition of her nerves, she divined the circumstances of the suicide just as it must have been enacted; Golymine, furious, crossing the empty apartment, and throwing himself into this gallery, where he knew very well that no one would come. Yes, he knew it marvellously well, for, in the days when Julia loved him, he had passed most of his time in the house. He had had the composure to grope for a candle and light it. He had torn a band from the heavy tapestry curtains, had dragged an ottoman up to the window, had stood upon it, and had pushed it away with his foot, after passing a slip-knot around his neck; the band itself having been previously secured to the window knob.

"This, then, is his revenge," thought Julia. "He has killed himself here to ruin me by the commotion his suicide will cause. To-morrow all Paris will know that Golymine, ruined, dishonoured, has hanged himself in the house of an 'irregular'—it will soon be said of his accomplice; for stories which have been forgotten will return to the memories of the women who are jealous of me, and of the men who detest me. Who knows but it will be said that I killed Golymine? And Darcy, who heard my quarrel with this unfortunate man, will perhaps not contradict those who say so." Then with that mobility of mind which was one of her slightest faults, she began to regret his death. "Madman!" she said to herself—"a hundred times more mad than I could have believed. I knew very well that he had more spirit than all the fools who despised him; but to kill himself at thirty years of age, when there remained to him so much manhood, courage, and intelligence wherewith to regain a fortune! Ah, he loved me! and if I could resuscitate him, how I would say to him: 'I am ready to follow you!'" And, struck all at once by a fresh idea: "Suppose he isn't dead," she murmured; "suppose that by cutting that cord—no, no—it is too late—it would be useless; but I cannot stay here—something must be done, or I shall be accused. I will go and call Mariette; and then send her to warn the police."

She now remembered that the gallery had no bell communicating with her bedroom, to which she had consigned her maid, so she walked towards the sideboard to take from it the candle which still lighted up the scene of the suicide. The lamp she had brought with her had been extinguished on falling, and without a light she did not dare to cross that long gallery in which she was about to leave a corpse.

Averting her head, she passed before the awful window, and she was about to take up the candlestick, when she saw that near it lay a paper—a leaf torn from a memorandum book. “He has written something,” she said to herself, “a farewell to me, no doubt.”

But she read these lines, written in pencil: “It is Julia d’Orcival who has killed me. I desire that the amount found in my pocket-book may be distributed among the poor of Paris; and I beg the French authorities to return the letters they will find there to the persons who wrote them.”

“Letters,” murmured Julia. “Mine, perhaps. Yes, he preserved them—he told me so; he tried to frighten me by reminding me that he held the proof that I had formerly been interested in his affairs—and his last thought has been to reveal the secret of our association. Ah, now I know what the malediction of the dead is worth.” She remained for a few moments crushed by this new blow, but then straightening herself up, she continued: “This is an infamous thing he has done. He expected that one of my servants would discover the body, that this paper would be given to a commissary of police without my being able to prevent it; he did not foresee that I should find it—but I have it now, and no one will ever see it, for I am going to burn it; neither shall any one see my letters.”

She exposed the paper to the flame of the caudle, and in the wink of an eye nothing remained of that strange will but its cinders. The letters, however, were in the dead man’s pocket. “I shall never dare to take them,” she said to herself.

The embrasure which Golymine had selected as his death spot was within six paces of the sideboard; and the corpse stood out like a black phantom against the window-panes. The gallery was dark. Silence reigned all around—a silence of the tomb. Julia, terrified, shuddered from head to foot. “It must be done,” she said to herself. “This candle is about to go out—and Mariette may come; I would not have her find me here.”

She thereupon caught up the candlestick with a trembling hand, and advanced towards the window. Her throat contracted, her lips were dry, and at the roots of her hair she experienced such a sensation as would be caused by the close proximity of a red-hot iron. Each step she took echoed painfully in her brain. At times it seemed to her that she heard a voice, Golymine’s voice, calling to her. On reaching the embrasure she closed her eyes, and barely escaped dropping her light a second time. The feet of the dead man almost touched the floor, for the cord had lengthened under the weight of his body: his head hung down upon his breast, and his face was half hidden in the fur collar of his pelisse. To find the pocket-book, it was necessary to touch the corpse, to search the clothing. “No, I cannot do it,” murmured Julia, without raising her eyes.

Indeed, had she been obliged to search that dead body, to touch the breast in which a fervid heart had beaten for her, the horror would have been too great. But it was written that she should effect her purpose. Her eyes, which she did not raise for fear of seeing the features of the man who had adored her, suddenly espied the end of a pocket-book protruding from one of the side pockets of the pelisse. Golymine had certainly placed it there intentionally. He was anxious that it should be found, and it was not in view of being agreeable to his former mistress that he had taken this precaution.

Julia d’Orcival understood this, and her last scruples flew away on

wings. She set the candlestick on the buhl table, on which the count's card ought still to be, and opened the pocket-book with the tips of her fingers. She drew from it, in the first place, some bank-notes, three bundles of ten thousand francs each, the last cartridges of this vanquished gamester, the viaticum placed in reserve for going abroad. Julia scarcely looked at the bank-notes, which ordinarily she did not despise so much, but opened the other compartments of the pocket-book with a feverish hand. She found in one of them what she sought, some letters fastened together by a silk thread—letters which exhaled a sweet perfume, and which were not all in the same hand-writing, for Golymine carried on a number of love intrigues. Taking these letters, Julia replaced the bank-notes in the pocket-book, the latter in the dead man's pocket, and then left the gallery without daring to turn round.

When she found herself again in her drawing-room, cheerfully lighted up, her self-possession returned to her. She passed through it, noiselessly entered her boudoir, and locked herself in. Mariette might have entered without waiting to be called, and she did not wish that Mariette should see the letters. Her plan was already fixed upon. She had determined to ring for her maid, to send her, no matter on what pretext, to the library, and to wait for the girl to return and inform her that she had found a man hanging there. So that no one might ask an explanation of her, it was necessary that no one should fancy that she had been the first to find the body, or accuse her of having touched the pocket-book.

But, first of all, Julia wished to burn her letters. It was in view of destroying the proofs of her former relations with Golymine that she had had the terrible courage to take them.

She was about to throw the whole package into the fire, but she changed her mind. It seemed to her that it was thicker than it ought to be if it contained only her letters. She rapidly unfastened the silk string, and saw that the love-letters had been sub-divided by the count into four packets. The Pole kept his amorous epistles in as orderly a fashion as if they had been business letters.

Julia soon found her packet. She knew her writing at once, and was somewhat surprised to find, upon the packet, a label, bearing this very explicit memorandum: "Madame d'Orcival, No. 199 Boulevard Malesherbes."

"They would have known what to expect," she said, bitterly.

She was still more astonished when she perceived that each of the three other packets also bore a name and an address. "What made him do that?" she asked herself. "Did he wish to use these letters to extort money from those who had written them? He was formerly accused of having abused in that way the weakness that a great lady had shown towards him. No, I rather think he was waiting to see me before he decided. If I had consented to follow him abroad, perhaps he would have tried to profit by the secrets he possessed. He had very little money left—and he wouldn't have asked any of me. When he resolved to die, because I refused to go away with him, he only thought of revenging himself on me. He knew very well that a commissary of police would not hesitate to open an inquiry about it, and that to avoid a scandal, he would destroy or return the other letters. I am sure that my rivals are married women." And after reflecting a few moments, she added: "If I chose, however—the names are there—it rests with me to do what Golymine would perhaps have done if he had not killed himself,

Why should I have pity on those who despise me? The Baroness du Briage has changed her night for the opera simply because her box is next to mine, and she does not wish to be my neighbour. Yes, but she is not in question. Whose letters are these?"

Julia d'Orcival now read the name on the first packet. "I do not know her," she murmured. "A woman of the middle classes no doubt. If she were one of the grand worldlings who go to the Bois and to the first performances, I should have heard of her. Poor woman! what a fright it will cause her when she receives the news of Golymine's death. And how she will bless me when I give her back her letters. For I will return them. Why should I try to injure her? Let us see the others."

Scarcely had she glanced at the second packet than she exclaimed: "She! these letters from her! Ah, I knew very well that he had been her lover, although he always denied it. The marchioness carried on an intrigue with an adventurer. And all the imbeciles who pelted Golymine with black balls would fight for the honour of marrying that creature, if she did not disdain their homage. Ah, I will perhaps return her her letters, but I will make my conditions—and it isn't money I shall exact."

At this moment a rap was heard at the door of the boudoir, and, before unlocking it, Julia d'Orcival concealed the letters in the pocket of her dressing gown. There was a third packet, the address of which she had not yet read.

"It is you; what do you want?" asked she of the soubrette, who replied with assurance: "Madame ordered me to remain in the bedroom, and I fell asleep before the fire there, but on waking up I saw that it was past midnight. I thought that Monsieur Darcy must have gone——"

"An hour ago, at least; but I did not need you. Go and get me the *Figaro* which is lying on the buhl table in the library."

The waiting-woman disappeared with the nimbleness of a mouse. Julia, left alone, went straight to her *bonheur-du-jour*, in the rosewood of which there was a secret drawer. She thrust the letters into it, and then awaited the melancholy news which she was perfectly prepared to receive. Three minutes later, Mariette, looking wild and distracted, threw herself into the boudoir stammering: "Madame—— Ah, my God!—if you know what I have just seen. The count——"

"Well? Has he hidden himself in the house to spy upon me?"

"He is dead, madame! He has hanged himself!"

"Hanged!"

"Yes, madame—to one of the windows of the library. I don't know how it is that I did not faint from fear."

"How terrible!" exclaimed Julia d'Orcival, who had easily turned pale. "Call the footman—the coachman—tell them to run for a doctor—notify the commissary of police—no, the doctor in the first place. There is perhaps yet time to recall the unfortunate man to life."

II.

SCARCELY had Gaston Darcy left Julia d'Orcival's residence than he started down the Boulevard Malesherbes, running like a man who has just escaped from prison and fears recapture. He had gone to Julia's full of care; but he went away with a light heart, and blessed the chance which had brought the Pole to the house.

"Those foreign Bohemians are of some use," he said to himself, joyously. "But for the scene which this one just made at Julia's, I believe I shouldn't have had the courage to annul the treaty. And, nevertheless, she has no reason to complain of me. That amiable treaty had lasted a year, and cost me nearly a hundred thousand—including the check I shall send to-morrow morning. She told me she wouldn't accept it, but I'll bet that she won't light her candle with it. The Cleopatras of the present day don't dissolve their pearls in vinegar—and they are right. But I am acting right in leaving Julia. She would have carried me too far. My uncle will throw his arms about my neck when I tell him to-morrow: 'It is all broken off—like in the *Chapeau de paille d'Italie*.'"

Madame d'Oreival would, in fact, have carried Gaston Darcy very far, but it was not precisely the fear of leaving his last louis with her which had stopped him all at once on the slippery path of ruin. It was not even in view of following the advice of an uncle whom he expected to succeed that he had taken this wise step.

Gaston Darcy really had the intention of entering the magistracy, and of renouncing gambling, suppers, and fashionable young women. But these fine resolutions would probably never have been carried out if the very strong liking he had had for Julia had not been stifled by a more serious sentiment, of which she was not the object.

She was but half mistaken in supposing that he left her for the purpose of getting married. Gaston had not decided to take that formidable step, but he loved another woman, or, rather, he was in a fair way to love her, for he did not yet know his heart altogether. He was none the less delighted to have so easily regained his liberty, and he felt the need of not keeping the joy to himself. Consequently he had no thoughts of retiring for the night. If he had known where to find his uncle, he would not have deferred the visit he intended to make him for the purpose of acquainting him with the good news. But his uncle went into society every evening, and he did not care to look for him in all the drawing-rooms of the Faubourg Saint-Honoré. He hailed the first cab which passed, and was driven to his club.

It was just the time when he knew he should meet his friends there, and among others the Captain Nointel whom Julia d'Oreival detested, without knowing him. Women have a marvellous instinct for divining that a man is hostile to them.

This club was not the most aristocratic in Paris, but it was perhaps the most lively, the one where the heaviest stakes were played for; the one which young bloods and moneyed men frequented from preference. Darcy was highly thought of there, for he possessed all that is required to please those to whom pleasure is the great affair. He was witty, he talked well, and, nevertheless, he never related long stories. He was always ready to join in any game, and he had a quality which surpassed all others in an assembly of gamblers, he did not win too often.

When he entered the great red-room seven or eight members were assembled around the fire-place, engaged in chattering. This fireplace of the red-room was the centre of information, and there, between midnight and one o'clock, every one repaired with the news of the evening. It is of course understood that scandalous anecdotes were much relished there, and the members did not fail to comment upon the freshest ones. The first sentence that Darcy caught on the fly was this: "Did you know that Golymine was her lover, and that he committed a number of follies for

her? She must really be a woman of the first water if she could get a large amount of money out of a Pole who was seldom generous to any one."

The member who had made this statement was a tall fellow, somewhat good-looking, a dark Don Juan, who passed for having been very fortunate among women of the foreign colonies in Paris. He especially pleased Russian and American ladies. He stopped short on perceiving Darcy, who judged the occasion a good one for a declaration of principles. Everybody knew of his connection with Julia, and he was not sorry to be able to publicly announce the rupture. It was a way of burning his ships and of removing all possibility of a reconsideration. He foresaw the seductions of memory, and did not yet feel himself strong enough against such weakness.

"It is Madame d'Orcival who is in question?" he asked.

"No," replied a charitable loungeur. "Prébord was speaking of a handsome Pole who was refused admittance here some time ago."

"And who associated formerly with Julia d'Orcival, every one knows that; but what you don't know is, that I am no longer in that charming person's good graces."

"What, it is all over!" exclaimed the club-men in chorus.

"Completely. The shortest follies are the best."

"Not so short that one, though. It seems to me, my dear friend, that it lasted several seasons."

"And the separation was an amicable one?"

"Why, yes," said Darcy. "We had not sworn eternal fidelity to each other."

"By my faith, my dear fellow, you were right to finish it. Julia is very pretty, and she has wit enough for four, but there is something else besides women of the world. Ask Prébord."

"Or Count Golymine. He knows them, he does."

"Speaking of that count, does any one know what has become of him?" asked a young financier who was a heavy player at the club.

"Pooh! I suppose he is at the sea-side. He is no longer seen anywhere. That is a bad sign."

"I shall be five thousand out of pocket money, which I was foolish enough to lend him."

"You were tipsy, then, that day?"

"No, but I was playing *baccarat* at the Marchioness de Barancos'. Seeing that he was received there, I thought I risked nothing."

"The marchioness did receive him, but she no longer does so. When he first came to Paris, everybody took him for a lord. It must be owned that he was superb—with the perfect air of a prince."

"And he had a deal of money. I saw him lose three thousand louis on parole, after a dinner at the Café Anglais. He paid them before noon on the next day."

"Yes, that was the time when all the women doted on him. He had such a way of dressing and driving a tandem—and he didn't pout over a sword-thrust. He also gave a pretty nice one to that brute Mauvers, who elbowed him intentionally in the lobby at the Opera."

"Well, gentlemen," said Prébord, "to listen to you, one would say that this second-hand *boyar* was the type of a perfect gentleman. You forget that there have always been ugly reports about him."

"That is true," continued a cavalry officer, who constantly frequented

the world of pleasure, "and I have always wondered how he found sponsors to present him at our club."

"And very respectable sponsors, General Simancas and Dr. Saint-Galmier. Ah! when one speaks of a wolf one sees his tail—there is the doctor manœuvring to approach the fireplace—look out for stories of travel!—and I perceive Simancas over there looking for a fourth player to make up his whist party."

"They don't suit me, either of them, your doctor and your general. General from where? Doctor of what university?"

"General in the Peruvian service, was Simancas. As to that excellent fellow, Saint-Galmier, he took his degree at the University of Quebec. He belongs to an old Norman family that emigrated to Canada. If they consented to patronise Golymine it was because no one doubted his honourable standing at the time. But they ceased seeing him a long while ago."

"How do you know? As for me, I execrate all these foreigners. A man is always asking himself how they live."

"Good! you are running in the same rut as our friend Lolif, who sees mystery everywhere. Didn't he imagine the other day that Golymine was the chief of a band of brigands, and that he directed the nocturnal attacks which the newspapers talk of so much. Lolif has a delightful mania for inventing judicial romances."

"He didn't invent the garroters. The day before yesterday, when little Charras left the Cercle Impérial with seventeen thousand francs in his pocket, which he had won at *écarté*, he was robbed and half strangled."

"The deuce! If those rascals are going to despoil the winners, it won't be worth while playing the owl," exclaimed the young financier, who often did it successfully.

Darcy had said what he wished to say, and what he had just heard respecting Count Golymine did not come to him as news. The conversation had no more interest for him. He went to look for his friend Nointel, but on crossing the room he was stopped on the way by the Peruvian general.

"My dear sir," the transatlantic warrior said to him, "there is only you who can get us out of trouble. There are three of us longing to play a game of whist at a louis the point. Will you complete our party? Oh, only until some one else arrives."

Darcy just assured himself, by questioning a footman of the club, that Captain Nointel had not yet arrived. He did not wish to go away until he had seen his friend, and he knew that he would certainly come. The talk at the fireplace commenced to tire him, and he did not dislike whist, so he accepted the general's proposition, although the personage in question was not congenial to him.

M. Simancas was, nevertheless, a man of good appearance and good manners, and Darcy and he had had those familiar relations together, which are like current money in club life, but which pledge one, however, to absolutely nothing. That evening the future *attaché* at the office of the public prosecutor was so happy at having broken his chain that he willingly forgot his antipathies.

The table at which he seated himself, to the left of the general, whom chance had given him for an adversary, was placed tolerably near the chatterers, but the chatting languished, and the lovers of the silent game of whist could give themselves up in peace to their favourite diversion.

Dr. Saint-Galmier, of the University of Quebec, was not one of the party. He had gone to mingle with the group which formed a semi-circle in front of the fireplace. The second hand of the first rubber had just been dealt when a young man, very stout and chubby-faced, entered the room, very much as a Prussian bombshell entered a garret at the time of the bombardment of Paris. The new-comer's hair was in disorder, he was blowing like a seal, and it was plain to be seen that he had run up the stairs. Ten exclamations were uttered at once. "Lolif! here's Lolif! Gentlemen, a crime has been committed, that's sure, and Lolif is charged with the investigation. Come, Lolif, tell us about the affair; where is the corpse?"

"Yes, ridicule me," said Lolif, as he wiped his forehead. "You won't ridicule me presently, when I shall have told you what I have just seen."

"Tell it, then, at once."

"Prepare yourselves to hear the most astonishing, the most overpowering, the most——"

"Enough adjectives! to the fact!"

"I can't talk unless you listen to me."

"Speak, Lolif, speak! We are all attention."

"Very well. Imagine to yourselves that, this evening, I dined at the house of a cousin of mine, who has the fault of living at the end of the Avenue de Wagram."

"Is he going to give us the bill of fare of his cousin's dinner?"

"Don't interrupt the speaker."

"I left there before midnight, and returned on foot, smoking a cigar, when, on arriving at the corner of the Boulevard Malesherbes, I perceived a crowd at the door of a house—a private house. And guess which one. Before the residence of Julia d'Orcival."

"Bah! Was it on fire?"

"No, there was no fire; but the police."

"Oh, come now, Julia was conspiring against the Government! In fact, she is seen at Saint-Augustin—at the Bonapartist anniversaries——"

"You are all mistaken, my friends. Let me proceed. There were half-a-dozen police officers on the side-walk, two detectives in the vestibule, and on the first floor the commissary was drawing up his report."

Lolif talked so loud that the whist players did not lose a word of his narrative, which commenced to interest Gaston Darcy so much as to make him forget his play. "It is your turn," said the general to him, politely.

"Yes, gentlemen," continued Lolif, "the commissary. And do you know what he was doing at Julia's?"

"The deuce if I can imagine."

"He had gone to take possession of the body of a gentleman who had committed suicide at the residence of Julia d'Orcival."

"From disappointment in love? That's the climax—the height of conjecture, for Julia never made any one despair."

"Wait!" said Lolif, taking the attitude of an actor who is about to launch forth a "cue" with effect, "that gentleman was known to you all. It was Count Golymine."

"It's not possible! Men of Golymine's stamp don't kill themselves for a woman."

"Whether it was for a woman or any other motive, I positively affirm that Golymine hanged himself in the library of the mansion—the rope was secured to the fastening of a window."

"What! you trump my *nine*, which is the best card out?" exclaimed Darcy's partner.

"And you, general, have just put your queen of trumps on my knave, when you still have the seven and eight in your hand," said M. Simancas' partner, with an aggrieved air.

The news, proclaimed trumpet-like by Lolif's piercing voice, threw the whole whist party into confusion, and the two players whom it did not concern cruelly suffered by their partners' mistakes. Darcy, who played very correctly ordinarily, revoked twice before the game ended, and the general, who was even a more skilful player, revoked three times.

"I don't know what is the matter with me this evening," said Gaston. "I am not in a humour for the game. I beg you to excuse me, gentlemen, and, so that you may not be the victims of my absent-mindedness, I will liquidate. I see two new players who have arrived. I owe nine points; here are nine louis."

The general pocketed the gold, and rose at the same time as Darcy.

"It is atrociously warm here, and I don't feel well," he muttered as he left the table.

Gaston paid no concern to the Peruvian's sudden indisposition. He only thought of getting near to the fireplace so as to hear the rest of this narrative, the commencement of which had troubled him so much. Golymine found dead at Julia's; Golymine who had left the house before him—that was not to be believed. Much moved and even very anxious, Darcy mingled with the group, and he had soon the sad satisfaction of learning all the details, which did not greatly reassure him.

"What would you have done in my place, gentlemen?" asked Lolif. "You would have gone on your way. As for me, I wished to be informed, and I am, I answer for it."

"You were born to be a reporter."

"No, to be an examining magistrate. All Paris will talk of this affair to-morrow. I alone am in a position to tell how it happened. I have my information from the commissary himself."

"He must have taken you for a detective."

"No, I know him. I know all the commissaries, and also their secretaries. Well, gentlemen, the inquest is over, and it has completely vindicated Julia."

"She was suspected, then, of having killed Golymine?"

"My dear fellow, in such cases some one is always suspected. And then there is the famous axiom: Look for the woman. But Madame d'Orcival was very clear in her explanations. She related that this Pole entered her house against her orders, and that he made a scene with her. Would you believe it, he wished to persuade her to follow him to America, on the pretext that she formerly loved him?"

At this moment, suddenly perceiving that Gaston was behind him, Lolif stammered: "Forgive me, my dear fellow, I hadn't seen you."

"Oh, don't restrain yourself on my account," said Darcy, forcing a smile. "Julia no longer concerns me. I have broken off since yesterday."

"Truly! Then I am delighted for you, for you might, in fact, have been interrogated, and that is always disagreeable. But where was I in my story? Oh, yes, I was saying that Golymine, thoroughly ruined and determined to cross the ocean, did not expect to go alone. He had fixed his choice on Julia, who has some capital, a superb mansion, and pictures enough to fill a museum. My word of honour, those Slavs doubt nothing.

Ah, it would have been a fine sale, if she had been willing to sell out to be agreeable to the Pole. But she was not so foolish. She refused flatly, and she showed the count the door, upon which Golymine, instead of leaving the house, went and hanged himself in the gallery—between a Corot and a Diaz.”

“That’s unlikely. Julia d’Orcival has servants, and a person does not wander about a house as about a bazaar.”

“She had only her maid with her, and it was she who, on going into the library, discovered Golymine hanging by the neck. And Julia, informed of the event at once, did not lose her head. She sent in search of a doctor, and warned the police.”

“Between you and me, she would have done better had she cut the cord.”

“Gentlemen,” gravely continued Lolif, “a woman is quite excusable for not daring to touch the corpse of her former lover. Besides, it would have been altogether useless. Golymine had been dead an hour when the maid found him. It was the commissary who told me so.”

“An hour !” thought Darcy. “I was still at Julia’s when he killed himself, then. She probably spoke to the officers about me, for now she has no longer any reason to spare me. To-morrow my name will figure in a police report. A pretty *début* in the magistracy !”

“But,” asked the Peruvian general, who followed the narrative with marked interest, “didn’t the count leave some writing—to explain the motive of——”

“No,” replied Lolif. “He did not think of killing himself when he went to Julia’s. She refused to follow him, and he hanged himself in a passion. It was an unpremeditated suicide.”

“The fact is,” said Simancas, “that poor Golymine was very excitable. I knew him in the past—in Peru—and I also made the mistake of presenting him here. I was deceived about him, and I have since heard of things which caused me to cease seeing him. But this end doesn’t surprise me. I knew that he was capable of the greatest extravagances—and that is really the greatest which a man can commit.”

“To hang himself for Madame d’Orcival is, in fact, pretty tough,” exclaimed Prébord ; “but Julia has an ugly deed on her conscience.”

“It seems to me,” said Gaston, tartly, “that, if Lolif’s account is correct, she has nothing to reproach herself with.”

Darcy did not like this dandy, Prébord, who boasted unceasingly of his success in society, and made a show of superb disdain for “irregulars.”

“Darcy is right,” added the officer. “A woman is never responsible for the foolish things a man does for her.”

“Then,” asked Simancas, hesitatingly, “nothing was found on Golymine—no paper——”

“Excuse me,” said Lolif, “thirty thousand francs in bank-notes were found in his pocket-book ; and that is sufficient proof that in this affair Madame d’Orcival’s conduct was correct.”

“Because she didn’t plunder the poor devil after his death ? A great merit, truly,” exclaimed Prébord. “She is exceedingly rich.”

“Well, well,” said the financier, “suppose I claimed the five thousand francs I lent that Pole ?”

“Claim it of whom ? Of the commissary of police ? But you have no note ; and Golymine leaves a raft load of creditors. If he only possessed the money he had on his person, they will, perhaps, have a louis apiece.”

"But," objected Lolif, "nothing proves that the count merely had that sum. He had always the appearance of a wealthy man. He died dressed in a magnificent fur pelisse."

"You saw him!" exclaimed Simancas; "you are sure that he wore his pelisse?"

"Very sure. I didn't see him; but the officers informed me. The pocket-book with the thirty thousand francs was in the pocket of a pelisse with a sable collar."

The Peruvian general pressed the matter no further. He probably knew all he wished to know. He withdrew from the group and went to join his friend Saint-Galmier, who was leaving the room.

Darcy also knew enough about it, and withdrew from the fireplace in turn. The narrative of this tragedy had thrown him into great perplexity. He was almost ready to reproach himself for having involuntarily caused the death of a man in whom, however, he was but little interested. Fortunately at this moment he saw his friend Captain Nointel entering the room, and this gave him great pleasure, for he felt the need of opening his heart to a friend. Nointel was his in all the strength of the term. They had known each other during the siege of Paris, Darcy having been a volunteer on the staff of a general of whom Nointel had been the aide-de-camp. And an attachment formed under fire is one for life. Still, friendship, like love, lives often on contrasts, and this Orestes and Pylades had neither the same character, tastes, or ideas of life. Nointel, who had resigned at the close of the war, had known how to lead an agreeable life on an income of fifteen thousand francs. Darcy had only wearied himself while diminishing a large fortune. Nointel loved only in earnest, and wished to be nothing after having been a soldier. Darcy, while loving at random, had feeble ambitious desires. The one was a sage, the other a rash society-man. From which it resulted that they could not get on one without the other.

"My dear fellow, I have a great deal to tell you," said Darcy, while conducting Nointel to a corner propitious to confidential conversation.

"Can it be that you have determined to break off with Madame d'Orcival?"

"It is done."

"Bah! since when?"

"Since this evening. But that isn't all. The Pole who was once her lover has hanged himself at her house."

"I know that. Simancas and Saint-Galmier have just told me of it. I met them on the stairs. Do you regret the Pole?"

"No; see how unlucky I am. I went to see Julia at ten o'clock, quite determined to break off my connection with her, and I have in fact done so; but while I was there this Golyanine arrived——"

"You showed him the door."

"Ah, no, I did not see him. Julia left me in the boudoir, while she received him in the drawing-room. It was she who showed him the door—unfortunately, for he played her the trick of hanging himself in the library. I came away without suspecting anything, and it was not till I got here that I learned what had taken place. That imbecile of a Lolif heard the story by chance, and he told it to the whole club—he is telling it still."

"Does he know that you were at Madame d'Orcival's?"

"No, for he would not have failed to have stated it. But it will be known. Even admitting that Julia remains silent, her maid will talk."

"The deuce! it is too bad. If you had not taken it into your head to be a magistrate, it wouldn't be half so bad. But your uncle will be furious."

"This is a nice time to preach morality to me. It is advice I ask of you, and not a sermon."

"Very well, my dear fellow, I advise you to make a complete avowal to your uncle. He will be delighted to learn that you are no longer connected with Julia, and he will see that you are not mentioned in the proceedings."

"You are right. I will go and see him to-morrow."

"And I also advise you to get married as soon as possible. You are now cured for a time of leading a gay life. But look out for a relapse. If you wish to avoid it, marry."

"Who?"

"Madame Cambry, of course. It only depends on yourself, so it is said, and you won't need to be pitied. She is a widow, it is true, a widow at twenty-four years of age, but she is charming, and enjoys an income of sixty thousand francs. You will be perfectly happy and have lots of children, as in the fairy stories. I will teach them to ride on horseback—you will give excellent dinners—to which you will invite me—and if you persist in wishing to be a magistrate, you will become at the least a presiding judge or public prosecutor."

"That would be perfect. But there is one little inconvenience—that I do not feel the least inclination to marry the lady in question."

"Then, Gaston, my friend, you love some one else."

"You forget that I have just left Julia."

"It is precisely because you have left her, and left her without a motive, that I feel sure I am not mistaken in your case. I know you, my boy. Nature has endowed you with a heart which does not accommodate itself to interregnums. The place is never vacant. Come, now! with whom are you in love? Is it with the triumphant Marchioness de Barancos? She is well worth the trouble. She is also a widow, but a widow, ten times a millionaire."

"I think her superb, but I am not any more smitten with her than I am with the Venus of Milo."

"It is another, then. I am sure of my diagnosis."

"You are more clever than I, for I couldn't conscientiously swear that I am in love or not. I know nothing about it myself. There is, somewhere, a person who pleases me very much. I shall perhaps love her, but I don't think I love her yet. While waiting for the mischief to declare itself, I will to-morrow inform my uncle that I have determined to become a serious man, and beg of him to press my nomination of *attaché* at the office of the public prosecutor."

The captain insisted no further; he had pushed friendship to the limit of discretion, and understood that Gaston wished to be silent regarding his new love affairs. Besides, at this moment the conversation of the two friends was interrupted by Prébord and some others, who came to propose a game of *baccarat*.

Darcy had had time to recover from the emotion which had been caused him by the announcement of Golymine's suicide, and he looked more coolly at the consequences which might befall him from this strange

adventure. He said to himself that, after all, he had nothing to reproach himself with, and that Julia had no great interest in compromising him. He proposed, however, to reward that lady's silence by enlarging the amount of the farewell gift he intended for her, and he did not mean to forget the waiting-maid, Mariette. He was, therefore, almost re-assured; and, strong in the praiseworthy resolutions he had just taken he found himself somewhat disposed to tempt fortune for a last time before giving up play definitively. Perhaps he was also not sorry to leave Nointel in order to escape a prolongation of the examination of his love affairs.

The captain, who was an exceedingly indulgent mentor, no longer sought to retain his friend, and Gaston followed the players into the secluded room where every evening they celebrated the worship of *baccarat*.

The game was an exciting one, and Darcy was extremely lucky. At three o'clock, he had gained ten thousand francs, just the sum he destined for Madame d'Orcival, and so he adopted the wise course of withdrawing and taking his winnings with him. Some of the combatants had already deserted the battlefield for want of ammunition, among others the handsome Prébord, who had gone away in a very bad humour.

Darcy received the taunts of the vanquished without getting angry, and went off at the same time as M. Simancas, who had returned to witness the combat after taking a turn on the boulevard with his friend Saint-Galmier.

The doctor had retired to rest, but the general, afflicted with cruel wakefulness, liked to sit up late, and *baccarat* was his favourite diversion. He did not play, but took extreme pleasure in following the game. Nointel regularly went home at one o'clock in the morning, and he had long since left the club when Gaston descended the stairs in company with the Peruvian, who complimented him on his triumph.

This transatlantic general did not stop there. By an adroit transition, he began to talk of Madame d'Orcival, to pity her for finding herself mixed up in a disagreeable affair; to pity Darcy for having broken off with so beautiful a person, and to blame the conduct of the Pole who had had the indelicacy to hang himself at her house. He said so much that Gaston finished by perceiving that he wished to draw information from him in regard to Julia's character and habits. This pretension seemed to him indiscreet, and the more so as he did not like Simancas; and so he cut the conversation short by taking leave of him as soon as they were outside the club-house.

But the foreigner was not discouraged. "You haven't your brougham," he said, after having rapidly examined the carriages which stood along the sidewalk. "We both live in the neighbourhood of the Champs Elysées, and your place is on my road. Would you like me to take you home?"

"Thank you," replied Gaston. "But it is fine, and I feel I should prefer a walk. I will return on foot."

"Hum! that's imprudent. There is a good deal of talk about attacks in the public streets. You carry a large sum about you, and I will bet that you are not armed."

"I have only my cane, but I don't believe in night robbers. Good night, sir." And, leaving the general there, Darcy rapidly crossed the boulevard, and went with a sprightly step towards the Madeleine.

He lived in the Rue Montaigne, and was really not sorry to take a

little exercise before going to rest. The weather was dry and not too cold, the distance was not too long, just what was needed to drive away a slight headache, produced by the emotions of the evening. Although it was very late, there were still some passers-by in the neighbourhood of the new Opera House, but, further along, the boulevard was deserted.

Gaston walked with his cane under his arm and his two hands in the pockets of his overcoat, and thought of everything excepting the highway-men whose exploits filled the newspapers. He reached the Madeleine without having met a living soul, but, on crossing the Rue Royale, he perceived a man and woman walking side by side at the entrance of the Boulevard Malesherbes.

There was nothing extraordinary in this, but Madame d'Orcival's residence was at the end of that boulevard, and a strange conjunction came to Darcy's mind. The man was tall and slight like Golymine; the woman was about the same size as Julia, and had something of her figure. Gaston knew very well that it was only a delusion, that Golymine was dead, and that Julia did not stalk the streets at such an hour. But the idea which had passed through his mind led him to look at this couple again. He then saw that the woman was trying to evade the man who walked by her side, and he understood that he was a witness of one of those little scenes which so often transpire in the streets of Paris. He knew that these kind of adventures amounted to nothing serious, and that, nine times out of ten, the persecuted damsel finally came to an understanding with her persecutor. So he did not care to go to the help of a person who, perhaps, on her side, did not care to be helped.

Meanwhile, the woman made now to the right and now to the left—her dashes being so sudden and so determined that one could no longer suspect her of feigning resistance. She was trying seriously to rid herself of a pursuit she had not encouraged, but did not succeed. The man was tenacious. He pursued the poor creature closely, and each time that he overtook her he stooped down to look her in the face, and probably to address her some coarse compliment. Darcy was too much of a Parisian to interfere inconsiderately in the affairs of others, but he had a certain tendency to Don Quixotism, and his temperament inclined him to take the part of the weak. Sceptical in regard to women who go about the streets alone at three o'clock in the morning, he was, nevertheless, not the man to allow them to be ill-used under his eyes. Accordingly, instead of going farther away, he remained on the side-walk of the Rue Royale to see how the affair would end, quite determined to interfere, if asked to do so. He did not wait long. The woman perceived him and came straight towards him, still followed by her implacable persecutor. Not doubting any longer that she wished to put herself under his protection, Gaston advanced, and at the moment when the man passed under a gas-lamp, he recognised him. It was Prébord, the noble Prébord, who boasted of seeking his conquests exclusively in the highest society; and Darcy at once had the idea that the stranger was not a mere adventuress, that this dark Lovelace knew her, and that he took advantage of a chance encounter to compromise her.

This idea only confirmed him in his resolution to protect a woman against the designs of a coxcomb, and he manœuvred in a way to let the dove pass, and to bar the way of the hawk. He thus found himself face to face with Prébord, who exclaimed: "Why, is it you, Darcy?"

On hearing this name, the dove, who had been flying rapidly, stopped short, and returned towards Gaston. "Monsieur," she said to him, "do

not leave me, I beseech you. When you know who I am you will not regret having defended me."

Her voice was husky with emotion, and, nevertheless, Gaston thought he recognised it. Her face, concealed under a thick veil, remained invisible. But the time would have been badly chosen to have tried to penetrate the mystery about this strange woman, and Darcy considered that he ought in the first place to rid himself of Prébord.

"Yes, it is I, sir," he said to him sharply, "and I take madame under my protection. What have you to say about it?"

"Absolutely nothing, my dear fellow," replied Prébord, without getting angry. "Madame is one of your friends, it appears. I couldn't divine that. Now that I know it, I have no desire to tread on your heels. I only regret having lost my trouble. You will be more fortunate than myself, I have no doubt, for you are lucky in everything. So I beg your charming companion to accept my excuses, and I wish you a good night," added the impertinent personage, turning on his heels.

The allusion to his luck succeeded in irritating Darcy. He was about to resent the ironical insinuation, and run after the jeerer to take him to account close at hand, but the strange woman caught hold of his arm and whispered these words, which calmed him: "In the name of Heaven, sir, don't pick a quarrel on my account; that would be my ruin."

The voice had a sweet inflection, which went straight to Darcy's heart, and he replied at once: "You are right, madame. This isn't the place for me to tell that pretty gentleman what I think of him—and I know where to find him again. I have delivered you from his persecution; what can I do for you now?"

"If I dared, I would ask you to accompany me to the door of the house I live in—No. 27 Rue de Ponthieu."

"Number twenty-seven Rue de Ponthieu! I was not mistaken, then. It is Mademoiselle Berthe Lestérel that I have had the honour of assisting."

"What! you had recognised me?"

"By your voice. It is impossible to forget it when one has once heard it—any more than one can forget your beauty—your grace——"

"Oh, sir, I beg of you, don't pay me compliments. If you knew all those I have just endured. It will seem to me as if my persecutor was still here."

"Yes, that fool must have overwhelmed you with his insipid compliments. Still he was not able to see your face, veiled as you were—as you are still."

"I tremble with the fear that he recognised me."

"He knows you, then?"

"He has met me in drawing-rooms where I have sung. For my part, I did not recognise him, for the reason that I had never noticed him; but, when you called him by his name, I remembered that he was pointed out to me at a concert given by Madame de Barancos."

"It was at that concert that I had the happiness of seeing you for the first time."

"And that you had the goodness to occupy yourself on my behalf. I was all the more touched by your attentions, because my position in society is a somewhat false one. I only go there as an artiste. I am paid for singing."

"What does it matter, since by education, intelligence, and a good heart, you are better than those holding the highest positions? Besides,

with your talents, it only depended on yourself to be a star in the theatrical profession."

"Oh, I don't regret having refused to enter it. I have no taste for the life that actors lead. My modest existence satisfies me."

"And the solitude to which you condemn yourself does not hurry you?" asked Gaston.

"Oh, well," replied the young girl, gaily, "I don't pretend that it represents to me the ideal of happiness, but I accommodate myself to it. There are women, certainly, who are more fortunate than I am. There are also those who are more unfortunate. For instance, I was brought up in a boarding-school with a charming young girl. I loved her a great deal, and we were much attached to each other, although she was older than I was. Well, to-day she has a handsome residence, and horses, and carriages."

"Excuse me, but that does not seem to me to have been a very great misfortune."

"Alas! I don't know of a worse one. My friend took the hard road. She commenced life as a governess, and tried to earn a living by giving lessons. But she soon tired of privations. She was an orphan like me—poor like me—her courage failed her, and Julie Berthier is known now as Julia d'Orcival."

Gaston gave a start which Mademoiselle Lestérel felt plainly enough, for she had given him her arm, and they were going up the Faubourg Saint-Honoré close to each other, like two lovers.

"You know her?" she asked. "Yes, you must know her, since you live in a society that—"

"All Paris knows her," interrupted Darcy; "but you, mademoiselle, you see her no more, I suppose?"

"Oh, no. Nevertheless she wrote to me once, two years ago, to ask me to render her a service. I was able to do so, and I went to her residence. She showed me her pictures—her objects of art. Poor Julia! She pays dearly enough for all that luxury."

Darcy did not continue the subject. He was happy to know that Mademoiselle Lestérel was ignorant that he had been intimate with Julia d'Orcival, and he had no desire to enlighten her on that delicate point. Mademoiselle Lestérel, on her side, perhaps regretted having confessed that she was not afraid to enter the house of an "irregular," for she said no more, and the conversation ceased abruptly.

The silence enabled Darcy to hear more distinctly the sound of a foot-step which for some time already resounded on the sidewalk. The first idea which occurred to him, when he heard some one walking behind him, was that Prébord had changed his mind and was following him. He turned quickly, and perceived some little distance off a man whose bearing had nothing in common with that of the dark Lovelace, a man who advanced with heavy steps and executed characteristic zig-zags while walking. He must have worn heavy shoes, and the nails in his soles rang on the sidewalk of the Faubourg Saint-Honoré like a hammer on a hell. Thus he could be heard at a long distance; but evidently he was only a drunken man on his way home, who was not occupying himself in any way with the couple preceding him.

Re-assured by what he saw, Darcy set to reflecting on the singular chances of Parisian life. At the commencement of the winter, at a musical *soirée* at the residence of the Marchioness de Barancos, he had noticed the

beauty and talent of a young *artiste* who sang delightfully. He had informed himself about her. He had learned that she belonged to an honourable family, that she lived by her art, and was perfectly virtuous. This phenomenon interested him, and he so arranged it as to admire her often. He did not miss one of the concerts where Mademoiselle Berthe Lestérel's admirable mezzo-soprano voice was heard, and at some friendly reunions, at which the *artiste* was treated as a guest, he was able to chat with her, appreciate her wit, her grace, and her distinction.

From that to courtship was not far, and Darcy was not the man to stop half way. He paid the young girl various discreet attentions, which she accepted without prudery, but with extreme reserve. She stopped him short as soon as he tried a step farther by presenting himself at her residence. He was not received, and when he saw her again in a friend's drawing-room she took upon herself to explain to him why she thought it right to close her door to a rich young man who did not pride himself on courting young ladies for good motives. She did it frankly, modestly, gaily; she put so much honesty into her declaration that she would have no passing lover that Darcy fell altogether in love with her.

From this second phase dated the coolness in his connection with Julia d'Orcival, who plainly perceived a change in his manners, but was mistaken as to the cause of it. However, Gaston had not fully decided to abandon himself to the current of this new passion. The life he led no longer pleased him, but he thought little of marrying Berthe Lestérel. He was not yet prepared to find delight in the prospect of a love-match with a professional singer.

Provisionally, he had taken a middle course by breaking off with Julia. He found himself then open to all engagements. And, behold, an unforeseen meeting furnished him all at once with an opportunity for a long conversation with Mademoiselle Lestérel. Was that an omen? Gaston, superstitious like all gamblers, believed it was, and thought he should be very foolish not to take advantage of this good fortune. Severe as a woman may be, she cannot refuse to remain on good terms with the man whose protection she has accepted in a difficult case; and this promenade together ought to greatly advance Darcy's intimacy with the prudent *artiste*. Not so prudent, however, since she ventured alone about Paris at a most unseasonable hour. This thought, to which Gaston had at first given little attention, although it had already occurred to him—this thought which somewhat resembled a suspicion—returned to his mind and caused him a peculiar impression.

In his capacity as a *viveur*—his uncle would have said a worthless fellow—Gaston was not sorry to imagine that the unassailable Berthe had a weakness to reproach herself with. The service he had just rendered her would then give him a hold upon her, and without being willing to abuse of his advantage he might perhaps profit by it. But, on the other hand, it displeased him to think that this young girl's modesty was only hypocrisy, and that Mademoiselle Lestérel, despite virtuous appearances, concealed some vulgar love affair. He would have liked to have exposed the fraud, and, although he had no claim on her, he was almost tempted to reproach her for having deceived him. This was a grave symptom; and if Darcy, independent as he called himself, had taken the pains to analyse his feelings, he would have seen that his heart was more seriously captivated than he admitted to himself. He only thought, however, of clearing away his doubts, and, to do so, he took the course of a well-bred man.

"It was a fatality meeting that Prébord," he commenced. "He left a club, to which we both belong, half-an-hour before I did, and he lives in the Rue d'Anjou, at the corner of the Boulevard Haussmann."

"It was just as I crossed the Boulevard Haussmann that he approached me," replied Berthe, without the least embarrassment. "I avoided him, but he followed me and spoke to me. I did not reply to him, but I could not succeed in discouraging him. The streets were deserted. I am not a coward, and, at first, I was not very much frightened; but when I found myself alone with him on the esplanade, beside the church of the Madeleine, I admit that I began to lose my head. I ran off to reach the Rue Royale, which is more frequented. I should have put myself under the protection of the first person who passed. My persecutor ran after me; he overtook me at the entrance of the Boulevard Malesherbes, and tried to take my arm. If I had not perceived you, I think I should have died of fright."

"Prébord conducted himself like a blackguard; to-morrow morning I shall send two of my friends to him."

"You will not do that," said the young girl quickly. "Think of the scandal which would result from it—if it were known that I was alone in the street at that hour. And then—expose your life for me! No, no—promise me that you will not fight."

Her voice trembled, and her arm pressed that of Gaston, as though she wanted to prevent him from running into danger.

"So be it!" replied Darcy, somewhat moved. "I will do nothing for fear of compromising you. If that man happened to learn that it was you he met, he is coward enough to relate the story in society."

"Then you swear to me there will be no duel," exclaimed Mademoiselle Lestérel. "You make me very happy, and to thank you, I will tell you how it happened that I found myself in the street at an hour when most honest women are asleep. It is time, in truth, that I should explain matters to you, and I ought to have commenced by that, for God knows what you must think of me."

"I thought that you had gone to sing at some concert," said Darcy, with an innocent air which hid an after-thought. He spoke like an examining magistrate who sets a party under suspicion.

"If I had been to a concert," replied the young girl at once, "I should be in evening dress, and I should not return on foot. But I am going to confide all my secrets to you," she added, gaily. "Know, then, that I have a sister—a sister who is married to a sailor who is returning from a long voyage—he has been absent for eighteen months, and will be in Paris in two days' time. At this moment my sister is alone and very unwell. She wrote to me to beg me to come and pass the evening with her. I went, and at about ten o'clock, when I was about to leave, she was taken with a nervous attack—to which she is subject. I could not leave her in the condition she was in, and when I left her house it was two o'clock in the morning. I wasn't willing to send for a cab—my sister has but one servant—and I expected to find one on the boulevard. My dear patient resides in the Rue Caumartin, and it was a hundred steps from her house that I met that man."

Darcy listened with much attention to this story, told in so abrupt a style, and he thought that Mademoiselle Lestérel justified herself a little as would a woman taken in fault. In the course of his gay life he had often heard stories of that kind related with superior assurance by young

women whom he accused of going out to see lovers, and whom he had not accused falsely. Sick sisters and cousins have always been of great help to unfaithful members of the frail sex. Darcy abstained, however, from all reflections, but his silence said enough, and the young girl did not misinterpret it. She also was silent for a few moments, and then, in an agitated voice, she added: "I see very well that you don't believe me. With any one else, I should disdain to justify myself. But to you I am anxious to prove that I have told the truth. My sister's name is Madame Crozon. She lives at No. 112 Rue Caumartin, on the fourth floor. I shall go to see her to-morrow, at three o'clock. Her husband will not arrive till the day after to-morrow. If he was here I should not propose to present you to her, for he is horribly jealous. But my poor Matilde has still one day of liberty left, and if it pleases you to wait for me at the door of her house, we will go up to her apartment together. I will relate my nocturnal adventure to her before you, and in such a way that I think you will be sure I have invented nothing."

Darcy did not yet appear to be convinced. He had lived a great deal among people whose company renders one mistrustful. Mademoiselle Lestérel looked at him and read on his face that he remained in doubt. She then became very pale, and continued, coldly: "You are right, sir. That wouldn't prove that my sister had not agreed with me to lie. I could, in fact, write to her to-morrow morning, to warn her that she would have to play a part which I would inform her of in advance. Ah! I did not believe that you would judge me capable of so mean an action. Will you then please to forget what I have just told you, and think of me whatever you please?"

There are accents which the most able comedian does not know how to feign; indignations which are not imitated; replies in which the truth reveals itself at each word. Darcy was touched to the heart, and understood finally that there was nothing in common between this proud young girl and the damsels who trump up plausible tales for their justification.

"Pardon me, mademoiselle," said he, warmly, "pardon me for having doubted you for an instant. I believe you, I swear to you; and to prove to you that I believe you, I will go so far as not to make that visit to your sister. But I hope that you will not withdraw your promise. I shall be so happy to see you again—and it is a happiness so rarely——"

"You will see me next Saturday if you come to Madame Cambry's," said Mademoiselle Lestérel, with some malice. "I will sing the airs you like. And now I must tell you that I am no longer angry with you at all, but I think it wiser not to take you to my sister's. Your visit would greatly trouble her. She has troubles enough; it is useless to worry her more."

"I will do whatever you please, mademoiselle, at whatever cost."

"You are, then, very anxious to meet me again. It seems to me that you don't lack opportunities. You visit all the houses where I go."

"Haven't you divined that I go there on your account? And have you not understood what I suffer from not being able to talk to you—to tell you——"

"But it seems to me that you talk to me very often," replied Mademoiselle Lestérel laughing. "I am not always at the piano, and I am not treated everywhere as a hireling. When I am invited to take my part in an improvised hop you know very well how to invite me. And, a certain

evening, you did me the honour to waltz with me twice. It was the night before New-Year's day.'

"You remember it."

"Perfectly. And it seems to me that you have somewhat forgotten it, just as you have forgotten that for five minutes already we have been in the Rue de Ponthieu. Here is the door of my house."

"Already!"

"Why, yes; it only remains for me to thank you again and say to you: 'Till we meet again.'"

She had softly disengaged her arm, and one of her hands was resting on the brass bell-knob. She offered the other to Darcy, who, instead of pressing it in the English style, tried to carry it to his lips. Unfortunately for him, the door was opened at the first tinkle of the bell, and Mademoiselle Berthe was as nimble as a gazelle. She disengaged her hand, and glided into the house, saying in her golden voice to her disappointed lover: "Thanks, once more."

Darcy remained stupefied before the door which the young girl had just closed. The adventure ended as in the fairy stories where the Princess Topaz disappears through a trap, just as the Prince Sapphire is about to detain her. And Darcy was not prepared for this eclipse, for he had not noticed how far he had gone while chatting so pleasantly, and he had fancied he was still some distance from Mademoiselle Lestérel's residence.

However, he could not pass the night in contemplating his belle's windows. Amorous follies are in season only in Spain, and a Parisian winter is not propitious to serenades. Mademoiselle Lestérel lived at the corner of the Rue de Berry, and Darcy, to return to his apartment in the Rue Montaigne, had only to proceed to the end of the Rue de Ponthieu. He very reluctantly resolved to do so, and went his way, keeping close to the houses. He would have done better had he walked in the middle of the street, for, just as he passed the corner of the Rue du Colysée, a man started up and seized him by the throat.

Darcy was taken off his guard. He had completely forgotten the stories of nocturnal attacks related at the club, as well as the man he had perceived afar off in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré. He was only thinking of Berthe, and was walking along with both hands in his pockets, his cane under his arm and his eyes fixed on the ground. The assault was so unexpected that he had not time to put himself on the defensive. He felt his cravat being violently tightened, and that was all. His breath failed him, his arms beat wildly in space, his legs gave way, and he fell, to use a vulgar but pointed phrase, all of a heap.

He did not altogether lose consciousness, but his senses were confused. It seemed to him that he had a weight upon his chest, that his clothes were unbuttoned, and that he was searched; but all this was done so quickly that he was scarcely conscious of it. How many minutes elapsed before he came to himself again? He never knew anything about it, but when his senses returned to him, he saw that he was lying on the sidewalk in the Rue du Colysée, and that his aggressor had disappeared.

He raised himself with an effort, felt himself, and while noting with great satisfaction that he was not wounded, he ascertained that his pocket-book had been abstracted, a pocket-book containing the ten notes for a thousand francs which he had gained at baccarat, with two others which he had placed there before going to Julia's.

At the moment of the attack he had thought vaguely of Prébord, but

now he could not hide from himself that he had stupidly allowed himself to be plundered by a thief, perhaps by the very man who had followed him, feigning drunkenness, to the end of the Rue de Ponthieu, and who, on seeing him return alone, had awaited him in ambush.

The adventure was humiliating, and Darcy determined not to boast of it at the club, where he had so often derided the poltroons who did not know how to defend themselves in the streets. Neither did he care to enter a complaint, for, to relate the affair correctly, he would have had to speak of his nocturnal promenade with Berthe Lestérel. After mature reflection, he concluded that it would be best to say nothing, and to resign himself to the loss of the money, which he felt all the less as the larger portion of the amount had been won at the gambling table. Still he was vexed, and said to himself that if he had accepted General Simancas' offer he would have avoided this foolish misadventure. On the other hand, he did not so much regret having gone on foot, since he had met, protected, and escorted a person who was far dearer to him than his pocket-book. Soon, indeed, the recollection of his charming walk with Berthe Lestérel drove away the disagreeable impressions of the robbery, and Gaston returned home consoled, although badly bruised.

He occupied, on the ground floor of a handsome mansion in the Rue Montaigne, a large suite of apartments with a stable, coach-house, and even garden, for his bachelor life was established on the most respectable footing. He had a valet, a coachman, a cook, four horses and three carriages, the appurtenances of a single man who has a hundred thousand francs' income, or a capital of four millions. His servants never sat up for him after midnight, and without having to submit to their attentions and respectful questions he was able to bathe his neck. Two robust hands had thereon imprinted the marks of their fingers, and Gaston's tightened cravat had left a red furrow which reminded him of Golymine's tragic death.

He retired to bed, but he had a deal of trouble to get to sleep. The strange events of the evening, composed of so much good and evil, came back to his mind, and he was pre-occupied as to what he should do on the morrow. At last he determined to go and see his uncle to acquaint him with his conversion; and he was also disposed not to observe the scruples of Berthe Lestérel who thought it best not to present him to her sister. He even contemplated repairing at about three o'clock to the Rue Caumartin, as if by chance, so as to catch a sight of the young girl when she went to visit the sister who detained her so late.

Lovers tax their ingenuity to combine plans to meet the object of their flame, and Gaston was decidedly a lover, but he was also very tired, and fatigue ended by bringing him sleep. He indeed slept nine hours without waking, and when he opened his eyes at about noon, the first thing he perceived on the stand beside his bed was a letter, which his valet had placed there without waking him, a letter which he recognised by the form of the envelope, the writing, and even the perfume; a letter which indeed smelt of Julia d'Orçival.

"Good!" said he, as he stretched himself, "I know what it is—some reproaches, proposals for peace, and, probably, the bill to pay. I am very much disposed not to read this dissertation." Then, after reflecting, he added: "Ah! the deuce! and the suicide of that unfortunate Golymine; I must know what she says on the point."

"My dear Gaston," ran the letter, "you don't suppose, I hope, that I am going to complain about you to yourself. You have left me just as I

was really beginning to love you. I am neither greatly surprised nor greatly grieved over this denouement. We both live in a circle where love affairs nearly always finish thus. When one reaches the climax of affection, the other vanishes, and the strings of the instrument snap in twain. You ought to have been more polite about it, but I bear you no ill-will. It isn't your fault if the tune which charmed you for a whole year has suddenly ceased to please you. Forget it, that air which we sang so well together; become a magistrate, get married; that is all the harm I wish you; and I should not write to you this morning if I did not think I could render you a service by informing you of what took place at my house last night.

"Count Golymine hanged himself in my library; hanged himself from despair, because I had refused to follow him abroad. He was a madman, was he not? A man does not hang himself for a woman. He shakes her off—that is your expression, I believe. At all events, there are still some simpletons who excite themselves, even to suicide inclusive. If I speak to you of this lugubrious event, it isn't to give you remorse, or to render myself interesting. I wish simply to tell you that you will not be mixed up in so deplorable a story. If it became known that you were with me while the count was dying that terrible death, the news would not be a recommendation with the Minister who will attach you to the public prosecutor's office. Don't be uneasy, however; it will not be known. I said nothing about you to the police officials who came to make the inquiry. Mariette alone, of all my servants, saw you, and she will not say anything. She will keep as silent as I will. I am not opposed to your rewarding her discretion, but I beg of you not to do me the injury to remunerate mine. It is enough to have abandoned me. I reckon on your not trying to humiliate me by treating me like a waiting-maid, whom one sends away without a motive. I even exempt you from replying to me, and hope that we shall never meet again. There is a death between us. Adieu. Be happy always."

This letter, signed with a simple initial, was written in a fine and singularly neat hand; it was the writing of a woman who is master of herself, and disdains to feign emotion; but it troubled Gaston a little. He felt plainly enough that Julia was trying to play with him, and that under these proud adieux there was hidden an intention to renew relations with him. He divined the supreme effort of a woman who knows her lover's weakness, and tries to reconquer him by disdain, disinterestedness, and a knowing use of all elevated sentiments. He did not allow himself to be caught, however, and was firmly resolved to stand his ground; but he could not help admitting that Julia rendered him a signal service by remaining silent. "Here I am now under obligations to her," he muttered, "and the deuce if I know what to do to alter the position. I will send Mariette a royal fee; that is all very well; but the cheque to Julia will be returned, that's clear. How shall I replace it? My faith! by my conduct. I will say everywhere that Madame d'Orcival is the most charming woman in Paris, and the best hearted as well; that she is witty to the very tips of her finger nails. Yes, I will proclaim it from the housetops. And then, she has a hundred reasons for consoling herself. She is rich, and the death of that Pole will bring her notoriety. To establish a woman's success in the gay world, a suicide is worth more than three duels. Poor Golymine! I didn't esteem him, but I pity him—and I pity Julia, too, after all. Only, I cannot help it."

After this conclusion, Darcy rang for his valet, got up, and proceeded with his toilet. He had almost forgotten the attempt to strangle him, and the loss of his pocket-book. The impression just made on him by Julia d'Orcival's letter was also subsiding little by little, and by the time he seated himself at the breakfast table, there only remained in his mind the sweet remembrance of Berthe Lestérel.

He was certain of meeting her very soon in a drawing-room which he frequented, but he found it too long to wait until the following Saturday, when, by a little diplomacy, he could see her that same day. After his breakfast, which occupied him until two o'clock, he walked out, and wended his way towards the boulevards. His uncle lived in the Rue de Rougemont, and he intended to go to his uncle's. But it happened that, after passing the Madeleine, he perceived the entrance of the Rue Caumartin, and the temptation was too strong. He went slowly up this blissful street, and at a quarter to three stopped before No. 112.

"I won't ask her to present me to her sister," he thought. "I should seem to be still suspecting her, and besides, I should cut a somewhat foolish figure at the sister's, who is no doubt a tiresome woman of the middle classes. But I can approach Berthe and say to her—well, say to her what? No matter, provided that she understands that I love her."

He had not been on guard five minutes, when he espied Mademoiselle Lestérel approaching from the direction of the Rue Saint-Lazare. He had never seen her except in evening dress, for the meeting of the night before could not be taken into account. By gaslight one cannot judge either of the beauty or the make-up of a woman. Now, however, in the sunlight of a beautiful winter's day, Berthe appeared to him still more charming than in society. She was dressed with perfect taste; her feet were elegantly booted, and she walked marvellously well. In one word, she had that indescribable *je ne sais quoi* which leads one to turn round to look after a stranger, and sometimes to follow her.

Gaston went forward to meet the young girl, and bowed to her with a somewhat embarrassed air, for he had perceived that her sweet face had darkened a little.

"What, sir, is this you?" she exclaimed; "in disregard of your promise, in disregard of my prohibition!"

"I swear to you, mademoiselle, that chance alone is to blame. I was passing by here and —"

"Fie! how naughty it is to tell a story!" interrupted Berthe, with a childish pout. "You would do much better to admit that you still suspect me, and that you came to confront me with my sister, as though you were an examining magistrate."

"No, on my honour! and the proof is that I am going off."

"Then you content yourself with ascertaining that I certainly came to No. 112 Rue Caumartin."

"Do you count the pleasure of seeing you as nothing?"

Berthe reflected for a moment, and then said in a determined voice: "Well, no, I won't have you retain your bad thoughts. I did not foresee that you would be here, you know that very well, as it was agreed that you should not come. You cannot therefore suspect me of having warned my sister. Come to her apartments, sir; come, I require it. You are about to ascend to the fourth floor. That shall be your punishment."

"My recompense," said Gaston, gaily.

Mademoiselle Lestérel was already in the vestibule of the house, which

was of neat appearance. Darcy did not require begging to follow her, and they ascended the stairs side by side.

"It is extravagant, what I am doing," said Berthe. "If Madame Cambry knew it I should never sing at her house again."

"Why so?" asked Darcy, at the same time trying to assume an air of innocence.

"Why, in the first place, it is not very proper for a young girl to climb the stairs of a strange house with a young man—it is true that she had already made the aforesaid young man escort her through the streets. And then, too, Madame Cambry is an eligible widow, whom you might perfectly well marry. It is even positively said that she does not look upon you with indifference."

"I never thought of her, and I think less of her than ever since —"

"Hush! here we are, I am going to introduce you, and in five minutes' conversation you will be quite edified as to my conduct, monsieur the magistrate. But you will do me the kindness not to prolong your visit, for my sister is ailing."

Berthe had rung the bell. A young woman, very pale, came to the door—a young woman who greatly resembled her younger sister. She must have been at one time as pretty as Berthe, but she no longer had the freshness of youth, or that lively air which gave so much charm to Mademoiselle Lestérel's physiognomy. "What!" exclaimed Berthe, "you come and open the door yourself in your condition!"

"I am alone," replied Madame Crozon, the sister. "I have sent Sophie to the railway station to see if my husband is in the train from Havre which arrives at three o'clock," she added, looking alternately at Berthe and Gaston.

"Your husband!" said Berthe. "I thought you did not expect him till to-morrow evening?"

"That's true," replied the young wife; "but his vessel reached Havre this morning—I have received a telegram from our friend—and perhaps Monsieur Crozon has taken the first train for Paris."

"Yes—it is quite possible, and, if he arrives, I shall be very glad to be here. Let us go into the parlour; I will explain to you in a few words why I come to see you with Monsieur Darcy—Monsieur Gaston Darcy, whom I often meet at Madame Cambry's—and who rendered me a great service yesterday, for which I am infinitely grateful to him."

Madame Crozon, considerably astonished, contented herself with bowing in response to the respectful salutations of this unexpected visitor. The parlour into which Darcy was introduced was furnished without luxury, but the floor shone like a mirror, and one would not have found a particle of dust on the velvet-covered chairs. It resembled a room in a Flemish house. On the wall, between two engravings by Jazet, there hung an indifferent portrait of a man, with a severe and somewhat displeasing face. It was the portrait of the husband, no doubt.

Near the window which looked out on the street there was a lounge, on which the young wife stretched herself, after indicating, by gesture, a chair to Darcy, who had the discretion not to sit down.

"You are suffering?" asked Berthe, taking her sister's hand.

"Yes, I was able to sleep for an hour last night after you left, but the attack returned this morning, and I feel very weak."

"Why didn't you remain in bed?"

The sick woman did not reply, but her eyes turned towards the window.

"I understand," muttered Mademoiselle Lestérel; "and, I beg your pardon, dear, for fatiguing you with questions. At what time did I come here last evening?"

"Why—about nine o'clock, I believe."

"And at what hour did I leave?"

"It seems to me that it was at least two o'clock in the morning."

"That is all I wished to ask of you, my dear Mathilde. One word more, and it will be finished. On leaving here, I couldn't find a vehicle. A man followed me, persecuted me, and I do not know what would have happened if I had not had the good fortune to meet Monsieur Darcy, who took me under his protection, and who was kind enough to accompany me to my door. Monsieur Darcy asked me no questions, but he may, and, indeed must, have been astonished to meet me alone on foot in the streets at night. I am very desirous of his esteem, and I begged him to be in front of your house at three o'clock to-day. I wished him to hear from your mouth the simple explanation of my nocturnal promenade. It is done. I have now only to thank him for the protection he gave me yesterday, and for the trouble he has just taken in climbing to your fourth floor."

This peroration was strengthened by a glance at Darcy, who perfectly understood its meaning, and prepared to beat a retreat. He did not, however, wish to leave without adding a remark to the young girl's discourse. "Madame," he commenced, "I beg of you to believe that it never occurred to me to suppose——"

He said no more, however, for he suddenly realised that Madame Crozon was not listening to him. She had half raised herself, and seemed occupied rather with the noises in the street. "A vehicle has just stopped at the door," she murmured.

Berthe ran to the window, partly opened it, and exclaimed: "Yes! It is he! He is alighting from a cab." Then closing the window quickly and addressing herself to Gaston: "Monsieur Darcy," she said, curtly, "you are sufficiently my friend for me not to hide the truth from you. Monsieur Crozon has been long absent; he has the fault of being horribly jealous, and we know that he has received anonymous letters, in which my sister is accused of having been untrue to him during his voyage. This is why you see us troubled."

Darcy thought that this disclosure tended to hurry his departure. "Indeed," he replied, bowing with an air of sympathy to the sailor's wife, "if he should meet me here that would confirm his unjust suspicions, and——"

"No," interrupted Mademoiselle Lestérel, "don't go. Monsieur Crozon is very violent. If he went to extremes, I could not defend my sister alone, while with you——"

"Dispose of me," said Darcy, quickly.

"No, no," murmured the young wife, "don't stay here, sir, he will kill you!"

"Don't fear that, madame; I will not allow myself to be killed any more than I will allow you to be misused."

Darcy, in replying thus, had his head erect and a resolute look in his eyes. The returning captain would find his match.

"You have not understood me," continued Berthe. "I don't wish my brother-in-law to meet you; your presence would exasperate him. What I desire is, that you should remain within distance to help us, if I should

call you. Come," she added, opening a door, "here is a room from which you will hear everything. There is a bolt on the door inside, and an exit leading straight to the staircase. Shut yourself in, and only return here if I cry 'Help!' But if, on the contrary, I say to Monsieur Crozon, 'Now, you will accuse Mathilde no more,' go out quietly. Come, it is necessary."

Darcy entered the hiding-place indicated to him by Mademoiselle Lestérel with a good grace. He quite realised the danger and also the ridiculousness of the situation, but he would have submitted himself to even more painful tests to please Berthe; and he said to himself, joyfully, that, by their initiating him into the family secrets, Berthe gave him a pledge of intimacy by which he could profit later. So he took his place in this dark room, pushed the bolt so as to avoid a sudden invasion of the enemy, and assured himself that the line of retreat was open to him, by a corridor which allowed him to leave the apartment without passing through the parlour. These precautions taken, he prepared himself for a domestic scene which he expected would be more unpleasant than terrible, but which he was quite determined to put an end to if the sailor became tragical in disposition. And he could not prevent himself from reflecting that he seemed destined to be an invisible witness of stormy explanations. Last evening at Julia's, to-day at Madame Crozon's, the situation was almost the same. Only the evening before it had ended with a suicide; and this time, to judge by the trouble into which the husband's return had thrown the two sisters, it might end with a murder.

However, Darcy had not the time for much reflection. Hardly was he established at his post of observation than he heard a door bang loudly, and a rough voice exclaimed: "Yes, it is I, madame. You did not expect me so soon?"

"Mathilde is very happy to see you again, my dear Jacques," replied Berthe in her sweet voice, "but you ought not to have surprised her in this way. She is very ill, and the emotion——"

"I have no need of your advice, or presence either," rudely interrupted the husband. "I wish to have an explanation with my wife, and I do not wish you to be present."

"An explanation, Jacques? After an absence of eighteen months you would do better to begin by embracing Mathilde."

"Then ask her if she would dare to come and embrace me," thundered the captain. "Ask her what she did while I was ploughing the seas to gain her a fortune. It is useless, is it not? You know exceedingly well what was her conduct."

"I don't understand what you mean. You seem to accuse my poor sister of something infamous. You have now only to accuse me of being her accomplice."

"I don't accuse you. But I have not returned to dispute with you. I have returned to punish my wife. And I require you to leave me alone with her. Off with you!"

"The deuce!" thought Darcy. "The affair begins badly. I think I shall have to play rough with this sea-dog."

"I will not go," said Berthe Lestérel with a quiet firmness. "You are irritated, Jacques; but Mathilde will justify herself without any trouble if you will question her quietly. At this moment, however, you are not master of yourself, and your anger might lead you to commit an act of violence. I ought not to leave my sister. And don't say that I have not

the right to interpose between her and you. I have but her in the world, and she has but me, since we are orphans. Whoever offends her, offends me; whoever threatens her, threatens me; and I swear to you, Jacques, if you wish to lay your hands on her, you must commence by killing me."

This speech, of which Darcy did not lose a word, made him start, and he held himself ready to enter the room as soon as he should hear the word agreed upon: "Help!"

But eloquence from the heart acts even upon the furious, and the captain changed his tone. "So be it," he said; "remain. You are a good girl, after all, and would to God your sister resembled you. But I swear to you that your presence will not prevent me from doing justice. It is between you and I now, madame."

Darcy heard a stifled groan. It was the only reply from the unfortunate Mathilde. He could not see her, but he pictured her to himself as cowering on the lounge, overwhelmed, crushed.

"Speak! come, speak!" shouted the husband. "Try at least to prove to me that you are innocent. You know very well of what you are accused. I wrote and told you, and I repent of having warned you. If I had returned unexpectedly, if I had had the patience to watch you, I am sure that I should have been able to convict you; whereas you are now going to relate some lies which you have had time to prepare. But I have not learned to dissimulate. When I love and when I hate I hide neither my love nor my hatred—and I loved you. Ah, how stupid I was!"

Darcy plainly noticed that the sailor's voice was agitated with emotion, and he commenced to hope that the storm was about to end in a shower of tears. But almost at once that terrible voice continued: "Answer me! Is it true that a year ago you were seen in a box at a theatre with a man?"

"No, it is not true," murmured the accused woman. "You have been deceived—or others have been mistaken."

"You are not going to assert, I suppose, that your sister has been taken for you," said M. Crozon, ironically. "Berthe defends you, and I do not blame her, but Berthe lives like a saint; Berthe has known how to resist all temptations—and nevertheless, she has no duties to fulfil except towards herself—she is free—but she is too proud to take a lover."

Darcy, who listened with more attention than ever, began to bless this furious husband who gave Mademoiselle Lestérel so glowing an attestation of virtue. In truth, he would have willingly embraced him.

"What you think of me, Jacques," said the young girl, "I think of Mathilde."

This time it seemed to Darcy that Berthe's voice was a little less impressive.

"Your sister answers for you, but you do not answer," continued the captain. "You lack the spirit to defend yourself. You never lacked it to betray me. Ah! you chose your time well. While you were publicly advertising your shame, my vessel was caught in the ice in Behring Straits, and I was risking my life every day. I tell you that better women than you are sent to prison."

"You insult your own wife, Jacques. What you are doing is cowardly," said Berthe, in a determined voice.

"I will insult her no more. A man does not insult the condemned. But I haven't finished. She must listen to me to the end. The unknown

friend who warned me gave me adequate details. I know where she met this man. He was not named to me, but he was indicated so clearly that I shall be able to find him, and I will find him, I swear it to you. I know at what time this acquaintance ceased, and why it ceased. Mathilde's lover left Paris. Will you still deny it now?"

"Jacques, don't you see that Mathilde is dying?"

"Let her die! It is not I who kill her. Do you wish me to tell you what she is dying of? I ought to spare you the humiliation of listening to this infamy; I ought to respect your maidenly modesty. But you declared you would stay. So much the worse for you. It is God who has stricken her, this wretched creature whom you uphold. Adultery has been followed by its consequences. Less than a month ago she had a child—a child which came into the world in I know not what suspected house—a child she hides. You see very well that I must kill the vipers, old and young."

"That brute will not kill the mother until he has found the child," said Darcy to himself, for he had not lost his head. He held himself ready, however, for whatever might happen, his ear ever on the alert, and his hand on the bolt.

"You are mad, Jacques," exclaimed Berthe, "I swear to you that you are mad."

"You would do better to swear that your sister is innocent," said M. Crozon, coldly. "Dare to do it! Swear! I will believe you, for I know that you have never lied. You are silent? You believe in God, you do, and you will not swear a false oath. Look here, Berthe, if I had still had a doubt, your silence would remove it. But I can doubt no more. And if I have not yet done justice to this woman, it is because I want her to tell me where that child is. When I have exterminated them both, when I have broken the head or pierced the heart of the lover, I will blow my brains out."

"Good!" thought Darcy, "I had guessed it. He will search for the child. And as he has now reached the paroxysm of anger, he will soon subside to a lower key."

The accused woman wept, but did not try to defend herself.

"And on the faith of an anonymous letter," said Berthe Lestérel, "on the faith of a denunciation which its author could not sign, you condemn your wife without a hearing."

"The friend who wrote to me did not sign his name, but he announced that he would make himself known to me on my arrival in Paris, and he would inform me of all which I do not yet know. Through him I shall find the wretch who has dishonoured me. I will find the child——"

"You will not find peace again in your soul, Jacques. Even if your unworthy suspicions were well-founded, your conscience would still reproach you for having been pitiless to Mathilde. And when you have recognised that she has been calumniated, it will be too late to make reparation for the evil you have done. May God forgive you!"

"God! but he knows that I adored her, this base wretch; that I would have given my life to spare her a sorrow. He knows that for three months I have suffered all the tortures of hell. He will judge me, and He will judge her. And, since you invoke His name, take Him then as a witness to the innocence of your sister. Swear!"

There was a silence so profound that Darcy heard his heart beat.

"Yes," continued the captain, "swear that she is not guilty, and I swear to you that I will fall at her feet and ask her pardon."

And as Berthe did not reply, he added: "Well! I am waiting."

Gaston also was waiting, and he asked himself: "What will she do?"

Covered by the revengeful words of her husband, Mathilde smothered her sobs and swallowed her tears. But suddenly Berthe's voice made itself heard as a voice of deliverance. "I swear," she said, slowly, "I swear that my sister is innocent of the crimes with which you reproach her."

"Innocent! She is innocent!" exclaimed the sailor. "Yes—you would not risk your eternal salvation to save her—and you know all she has done, since you have never passed a day without seeing her."

"Not one," said Berthe, with an effort. And in a louder, clearer tone, she added: "I hope that now you will accuse her no more."

Darcy had not forgotten the words agreed upon, and he did not need to see what was taking place in the parlour to understand that the oath sworn by Berthe had saved Madame Crozon. Gaston had promised to leave as soon as he had heard the signal, and he was not at all anxious to prolong his stay in the dark room. So he quietly opened the door leading towards the staircase, closed it cautiously, and leisurely walked down the four flights.

At the door of the house he saw a cab heavily laden with packages, and watched over by a female servant, whom the suspicious husband had no doubt left there, the better to surprise his wife. Said Gaston to himself: "Frequent voyages to the North Pole have not mollified the manners of this whaleman—for he must be a whaleman. Roland the Furious was not more furious than Captain Crozon is. The lady has had a fine escape, and but for the adorable Berthe, Lolif would perhaps have had a harrowing item of news for to-morrow. Is she innocent, this woman Mathilde? I think so, because her sister has sworn it. The husband is a jealous brute, who would have stupidly believed in a stupid calumny. But who the deuce would play this poor woman so wicked a turn? Some ousted gallant, probably. It is always so. Unless, indeed, she really betrayed her disagreeable husband while he was harpooning whales. In which case, Mademoiselle Lestérel would have taken a false oath. Hem! for an honest girl, that would be a little——" And, after devoting a few moments to the examination of his conscience, Darcy concluded: "My faith! after all, if she really has done so, I should bear her no ill-will, and I am sure that God would forgive her in consideration of her intention. When the salvation of a sister's life is in question, to lie becomes almost a praiseworthy action. It is the sequel alone which troubles me. If the anonymous denunciator pursues his noble occupation, and if he furnishes the sea-dog with proofs, what will become of the two women? This fellow Crozon is capable of killing them. That will be the time, if ever, for me to oppose him. And to prepare myself to interfere, I must see Mademoiselle Lestérel, and have a serious conversation with her. Yes, but where? Going to her residence without her permission would be running the risk of displeasing her. However, I shall certainly meet her on Saturday at Madame Cambry's *soirée*—but then Saturday is a long way off."

And reflecting thus, Gaston walked in the direction of the Rue de Rougemont. He knew that his uncle returned home from the Palais de Justice every afternoon at four o'clock, and he was very anxious to see him. One feels the need of confiding in a friend when one's heart is full.

Now, M. Roger Darcy, the examining magistrate of the Tribunal de la Seine, treated his nephew as a friend, and Gaston's heart was overflowing. The remembrance of Berthe Lestérel filled to the brim this heart of his, in which there no longer remained room for passing fancies, and he perceived that the feeling he had at first taken for a caprice was really and truly love itself.

Uncle Roger occupied a fine residence, which belonged to him, and there led a bachelor's life, which only resembled that of his nephew on the good side. Like Gaston, he had a stylish home; he loved the society of women as much; but he only frequented good company, and if he fully expended his income, at least he did not encroach upon his capital. He had entered the magistracy as much from inclination as to follow the traditions of his family, and he was certainly one of the most intelligent magistrates within the jurisdiction of Paris. Not one equalled him in clearing up a perplexing affair. He possessed great clearness of mind, a never-failing memory, marvellous sagacity, and prompt intuitions—the veritable traits of genius. It seemed as though he had been created and brought into the world to be an investigating magistrate, and during the seven years that he had been one, experience had completed his marvellous aptitudes.

He passionately loved the difficult functions that he discharged so well, and passed half of his life in his office; but after all he was a magistrate only during his office hours. At home he became a man of the world again—a gay companion, a jovial guest at table—knowing Paris to its foundations, and with sufficient knowledge of the shoals of life to remain indulgent toward the shipwrecked. To all these merits he joined a little eccentricity, which lent something peculiarly personal both to his appearance and language. Gaston found him dressed in a jacket and striped trousers, smoking a large cigar, and plunged to the ears in a large arm-chair. He was forty-five years of age, but appeared to be ten years younger. Perfect teeth, not a grey hair, bright eyes, and a magisterial nose—such were the main characteristics of his head. In figure he was tall, slight, and spare, and he had a commanding air, tempered by a genial smile. Clean shaved, as became a wearer of the gown, those who were not acquainted with him took him for a naval officer.

"So it is you, scapegrace?" he said, on perceiving Gaston. "Do you want a *cabanas*? Take one from the box. They happen, by chance, to be excellent."

"Thanks, uncle, I have some better ones," said the nephew, taking a Russia-leather cigar-case from his pocket.

"You are somewhat too conceited, my dear fellow. You imagine to yourself that you have the first pick, because you have yours brought direct from Havana, whereas—well, here I am losing myself in digressions. However, I no longer listen to the arguments of the bar, since I now only sit in my chambers. To the question, Maitre Darcy! for there is a question, of course. Take your position before the fire, and prepare yourself to receive a reprimand as you deserve. Ah, you have some nice acquaintances! Accept my compliments."

"If you refer to Madame d'Orcival, I wish to say to you that——"

"Yes, let us talk about your D'Orcival. There have been some fine doings taking place at that woman's residence. Some one has hanged himself there."

"I know that, uncle, but——"

"And who is this fellow who hanged himself there? A count who is only an adventurer—a sort of Polish Casanova; your rival, no doubt. No, you say—well, never mind about that, but really it is altogether too much that your name, my own—since I am unfortunate enough to be your uncle on the paternal side—should be mentioned in connection with an affair relating to a worthless woman and an intriguer."

"Don't be uneasy, uncle; I shall not be brought into question, for I have broken off all connection with Julia."

"Bah! truly?"

"Completely, radically, definitely! If these three adverbs do not suffice——"

"Yes, yes! I don't think you sufficiently destitute of sense to try to ridicule me. You don't take me for a stage uncle, surely. Then, it is a conversion——"

"A sincere one, I assure you."

"And meritorious, I admit, for the wench is pretty—even very pretty. Can I know to what happy influence this conversion is due? A man does not take the road to Damascus as he takes the Avenue des Champs-Élysées—by chance."

"Well, uncle, I have nothing in common with Saint Paul. It was not an illumination from above which converted me. But I have reflected a good deal during the last month. I said to myself that I was twenty-nine years of age; that it was time to bring matters to an end. The Parisiennes are all the same. I'm tired of them. The club bores me. Play only amuses me when I lose, and then it becomes a too costly diversion. As a recreation, I now only see the magistracy, and I have come to beg you——"

"You call the magistracy a recreation! What disgraceful irreverence! If you enter the office of the public prosecutor with these ideas, you will make a pretty substitute!"*

"But it seems to me, my dear uncle, that fifteen years ago, when you were appointed as substitute at Nogent-le-Rotrou, if I am not mistaken, you did not lead the life of a hermit."

"In my place it was different. I was already endowed with the sacred fire. You will, perhaps, not make a bad judge. Your grandfather was one, your great-grandfather too. To be a judge is in the Darcy blood. But if you only see in the magistracy a career like any other, if you enter it only for advancement, I advise you to remain what you are—a useless but inoffensive being."

"Thanks, uncle," said Gaston, laughing.

"But," continued M. Darcy, "when I say inoffensive, I go too far. I believe you to be quite capable of acting wrongly, not from your being evilly disposed, but from impulse. Now, I return to my subject, that is to say to the public prosecutor's office. It lies only with me, of course, to have you attached there. The prosecutor told me again yesterday that he would take you willingly. And, in a year, you might be sent as an assistant judge to a court of the jurisdiction. Good! But after that? Do you imagine that your brain would become rational because your head

* The "substitute" or deputy-prosecutor assists the titular holder of the office in preparing his cases, and personally conducts legal affairs of minor import, as counsel for the State. Each of the departments into which France is divided has one or two public prosecutors, and these in turn each have two or three substitutes to assist them or take their place.—*Trans.*

would be covered with a black official cap? Have you even an idea of the amount of wisdom and impartiality necessary to make a passable judge? For fifteen years I have laboured to acquire those qualities, and I don't flatter myself that I possess them. And I never enter upon an investigation without being taken with a feeling of self-mistrust. You, you hesitate at nothing. I will bet that, if you were a judge, you would not hesitate to investigate an affair in which the D'Orcival, who has been your mistress, was mixed up."

"Excuse me! I should hesitate, and I should even refuse. But those are accidents which do not happen."

"You think so? You think, perhaps, that this woman, D'Orcival, has only some peccadilloes to reproach herself with? Well, my dear fellow, it needed but little more for her to be arrested in connection with this hanging affair. Here, if you wish to be edified about the woman, read these police memoranda which I received an hour ago."

On arriving at his uncle's, Gaston had asked himself if he would not do well to relate the story of his last visit to Madame d'Orcival. Julia, in her farewell letter, had promised him to be silent on the subject, and had requested him to do the same; but he knew that his uncle Roger was incapable of abusing confidence, and he would not have been sorry to have had his advice on the matter. However, when the magistrate thus invited him to read a police report in which Julia was mentioned, Gaston thought that before speaking he had better acquaint himself with this document which interested him in more ways than one.

He therefore took the official paper held out to him by M. Roger Darcy, and read as follows: "Julie-Jeanne-Josephine Berthier, called Julia d'Orcival, thirty years old. Born in Paris in 1848. A natural daughter acknowledged by a retired officer who enjoyed a certain competency, and who had her brought up at a boarding-school at Saint-Mandé. Never knew her mother. Lost her father a year after she left the boarding-school, and inherited from him some twenty thousand francs. Received as a governess at the Hôtel de Ville, and placed in that capacity with some rich foreigners who travelled a great deal. Seduced and abducted at Aix in Savoy by a Spaniard, who took her to Madrid, where he died soon afterwards, bequeathing her by will a large amount of money. Returning at once to Paris, Julie Berthier profited by the independence assured to her by these legacies to frequent the society of fast women, and win therein an exceptional position for herself. Her beauty, education, and wit promptly conducted her to fortune. Has had numerous intrigues; and is at the present time protected by a young man belonging to an excellent family."

Gaston was reading the memorandum aloud, and at this passage his uncle began to laugh. "It is you who are referred to, my dear fellow," he said, "and if the police officer who wrote this report has not named you, it is because he knows that you are my nephew. He knows you, depend upon it. You are noted down at the préfecture. A fine recommendation for attaching you to the office of the public prosecutor!"

"But!" exclaimed Gaston, "your police officer is badly informed. He should have put *was* in place of *is*, and have left out the words 'the present time.'"

"You want to impose on me with your *was*. The police don't keep a daily register of the changes in the affections of these women. The force would not suffice for it. And, after all, it isn't so long since you freed

yourself from the claws of Julia d'Orcival. I espied you the other day with her in a box at the Variétés, at the first performance of the 'Grand Casimir'—where, by the way, I greatly amused myself. When did you break off?"

"Yesterday."

"The deuce, it was high time you did; but pray continue this interesting perusal."

Gaston, somewhat out of countenance, at once complied: "Among other acquaintances, Julie Berthier made that of the self-styled Count Golymine, three years ago. This personage, whose real name, it is believed, is Lemburg, was born in Galicia, and had travelled a great deal in Europe and America. He lived in great style in Paris, without any one knowing the origin of his fortune. Had been accused in Russia of making counterfeit bank-notes, and suspected in France of practising blackmail. These suspicions were all the more probable as he had been the lover of several women of high position. Nevertheless, he had never been the object of any official complaint. Placed under surveillance for a year, nothing was discovered against him except the fact of his being intimate with certain personages who were under suspicion like himself, although frequenting fashionable drawing-rooms and the clubs. This surveillance ceased six months ago, as the count showed himself much less in public, and appeared to be in embarrassed circumstances. Its renewal was under consideration at the time when night attacks became so frequent in the streets of Paris. An anonymous letter, addressed to the prefect of police, designated Golymine as being the occult chief of a band of men of apparent good standing who informed subaltern malefactors respecting rich persons who went about at night with valuables in their pockets. Nothing proved, however, that this denunciation was well founded, and nothing has ever come of it."

"A brigand chief!" said M. Darcy. "I'm no longer astonished that the women doted on him. But I don't much believe in the organised band of swell night robbers. The officers are somewhat imaginative now. Reading Gaboriau's romances has spoiled them."

Gaston, had he so chosen, could have furnished his uncle with some fresh information as to the proceedings of these gentlemen, the night robbers, but he had determined not to speak of his adventure to any one, and, all the more, as the report he was perusing interested him sufficiently to make him anxious to know the whole of it. He again began to read, and this time as follows: "From all the information collected in regard to Golymine and Julie Berthier, there came a presumption of connivance between them: a presumption which at once aroused the attention of the prefecture as soon as the suicide of the count was reported. The commissary of police sent to investigate the matter had to find out, in the first place, if the count's death was not the result of a crime. The testimony and medical verifications have left no doubt in that respect. Golymine committed suicide at the close of a violent altercation with his former mistress. The arrangement of the apartments and the absence of any servants explained how he was able to hang himself without Julie Berthier's knowledge. Besides, she sent to the commissary of the district as soon as she heard of the events from her waiting-maid, who was the first to discover the body. Upon Golymine's person the officials found the sum of thirty thousand francs in bank-notes, four hundred and seventy francs in gold, with a valuable gold watch and some jewellery of consider-

able worth. It was, therefore, certain that a robbery was not committed. However, Golymine had no letters nor papers either in his pocket-book or in his pockets. A search made this morning in the furnished apartment he occupied in the Rue Neuve-des-Mathurins had led to the discovery of no written document. There is, nevertheless, reason to believe that Golymine was the holder of correspondence compromising certain persons. And it is not impossible that his last visit to Julie Berthier was connected with this correspondence. The connection which formerly existed between them authorises this supposition. But, to verify it, a perquisition in the house of Julie Berthier would be indispensable, and the commissary could not take it upon himself to order one. Julie Berthier, called Julia d'Orcival, is connected with some men of the highest society, and the application of this measure presented inconvenience."

"They would find your *billets-doux*, my boy," said M. Darcy laughing. "Oh! they would find very few of them, and those they would find are not in a very tender style: 'This evening, at half-past seven, at the Café Anglais,' or 'I cannot get a proscenium box for to-night.'"

"Well, well, however that may be, to my mind it would be exceedingly disagreeable for you to be mixed up, in any way whatever, with this villainous affair—especially now that you have broken the shackles which enchaind you. Don't be alarmed, however. A perquisition will not be made in the house of your ex-belle. At first, the police officials saw something mysterious in this suicide. They already talked of charging me with the investigation. But, on taking a closer view, they found that there was nothing in it, and all will be limited to an official report. I am very much relieved on your account—and also on mine. The remembrance of your love affair with Julia d'Orcival would have embarrassed me. Now let us talk about something else."

"Very willingly," said Gaston.

"Well, I have you here, and I am not going to let you go. You will dine with me. There is a haunch of venison, about which you must give me your opinion." And, as Gaston made a gesture as though he wished to excuse himself, his uncle exclaimed: "Don't tell me that you have promised some ninnies of your acquaintance to join them at the restaurant. You won't dine with your princess, as you have quarrelled past making up—so you must dine with me. And, in the meanwhile, prepare yourself to listen to a serious discourse."

"I am excellently disposed to enjoy it."

"Then I will come to the point without a preamble. You wish to be a magistrate; that is all very well, but it is not enough. You must marry."

"I don't say no."

"Good! Now that is admirable. And I congratulate you on having become so accommodating on that point. Not a week ago, when I talked to you of marriage, you reared like a restive horse. It is true that you were not your own master. Your Julia then led you by the nose. I am patient because I am an indulgent uncle. But now I can trifle no longer. You are about to reach your thirtieth year, my dear boy, and now is the time. Later on you will have a multitude of reasons to bring forward for remaining a bachelor, and that is what I shall not allow. I wish to see some heirs to the name. I have you; but that doesn't suffice me. I must have some little Darceys who will be able to preside over the tribunals of the twentieth century. Your great-grandfather presided before the Revo-

lution. I shall preside as soon as I get too old to make a good examining magistrate, and I mean that the series shall be continued indefinitely. And it is you that the matter regards."

"Why not you, uncle?"

"Oh! oh! you had better not dare me to do it. If you really had a notion to act the stubborn, I should very readily get married; I should have half a dozen boys—and then, my fine fellow, good-bye to any inheritance from me."

"Oh!" said Gaston, with the gesture of disinterestedness.

"Don't turn up your nose at it. My fortune will amount to a good round sum, and you must already have some pretty holes in yours, which need stopping up. Come now, frankly, how much of your capital have you devoured since your majority?"

"Two hundred thousand francs—perhaps a little more."

"Or a great deal more. Women like Julia d'Orcival cost dear. But I accept your figure of two hundred thousand. You have still then an income of thirty thousand francs. At the rate you are going, it means the poorhouse in five or six years—or Australia, California, or other forced expatriations. Follow my argument, I beg of you. It is rigorously logical. At the present time, you still have a matrimonial value. You are young; you are neither a fool nor badly built; you are thought to be rich, and it is known that you will inherit from me—at a time as distant as possible, I warn you. Now, by remaining a bachelor, you will be worth nothing at all in five years' time, for you will not have a sou left; and I, tired of waiting for you, shall be well married. You will, therefore, be reduced to hunting for rich, hump-backed young ladies. A charming prospect!"

"But, uncle, since I tell you that I am determined—on principle."

"Very well! Then, I have your affair. Madame Cambry has sixty thousand good francs as her income, and I know few women as captivating and deserving as she is. You will raise the objection that she is twenty-four years of age, and a widow. I will answer you that five years' difference in ages is sufficient to make a well-matched couple, and that Madame Cambry was merely married for six months to a man who was by no means amiable, so that you will have no trouble in making her forget him, for I am pretty sure that she finds you to her taste. Come! what have you to say against Madame Cambry? You are not going, I suppose, to contest her beauty, or her wit, or her virtue. Neither will you pretend that she is displeasing to you, for you don't miss a single one of her Saturdays."

"I appreciate all her qualities, uncle; only—it isn't she I am thinking of—and I am of opinion that she would suit you perfectly."

"But, you unhappy boy, I am twenty years older than she is! And then, I am not in question. If I have properly understood your round-about answer, you don't care to marry Madame Cambry, but you have some one else in view. Very well, that reduces the evil one half. I am not absolutely determined that the amiable widow should become my niece, and provided that the woman of your choice is not of doubtful honesty, or bad family, I ask no better than to see her become your wife. Now, tell me the name of the girl you prefer, enlighten me summarily about her, and introduce me to this marvel as soon as possible. I will sign the contract with both hands, and I am capable of putting something handsome among the wedding presents."

"But, uncle, I have not yet reached that point. I have, indeed, met a young girl who pleases me very much, and, perhaps, I shall decide to marry her—if she will have me. Only, before determining positively on the matter, I wish to know her better, and study her character."

"Oh! I see what you are about. You want to get out of it by dilatory measures, as they say at the Palais de Justice. And you imagine that by always answering me: 'I am studying her character,' I shall be satisfied? You imagine that I shall wait till it suits you to give me some little nephews? You are mistaken, my dear boy, and to take away this illusion, I am going to give you my ultimatum."

"It is useless. I promise to tell you within a few days —"

"Listen to me then, chatterbox, instead of interrupting me. I give you a respite of three months. You hear, Gaston, three months. After that period, I declare to you that I shall be the one to marry. Now, I have had my say, so come into the yard and see a horse I am offered for my brougham. You know more about horse-flesh than I do. You will give me your advice."

III.

WHILE Gaston Darcy thus employed his time, Julia d'Orcival did not waste hers. She had, as it may well be believed, passed a very unpleasant and troublesome night. The official investigation, disguised under the form of a demand for ample information, had detained her very long. The commissary and the officers had not left the house till four o'clock, and the body of the unfortunate Golymine had not been taken away till five.

Although Julia had been spared the anguish of seeing her former lover again, she had not yet recovered from the emotions of the night when she rose at about noon, just at the time when Gaston received the letter she had written to him before retiring to bed.

She had tea for breakfast, made Mariette relate to her the rumours which circulated in the neighbourhood, again recommended her not to speak to any one of M. Darcy's visit, and gave her her instructions, which were, not to go out, but to usher in Gaston if he presented himself.

Julia was persuaded that he would come to thank her for her discretion, and she did not yet despair of leading him to a renewal of their connection. She thought she knew him thoroughly, and she had her idea in writing to him that she had accepted the rupture. Experience had taught her that the surest way to bring a lover back is to show him that he is cared nothing about. She had, therefore, at once determined to treat Gaston's case with indifference, and she expected that the employment of this method would produce an excellent effect.

Accordingly, after arraying herself in a toilet appropriate to the occasion, she waited in the boudoir where, on the night before, the scene of the separation had taken place. Julia d'Orcival had other projects, but their execution was subordinate to the result of the interview which she hoped to have, that same day, with Darcy. The letters of the three women who had been imprudent enough to write to Golymine were put away in the secret drawer of the little rosewood stand, but she did not intend to leave them there. Only, there was no hurry about dealing with them. Such arms as those do not rust.

Towards three o'clock in the afternoon Mariette made her appearance

in the boudoir where Julia sat reading listlessly. The maid had the look of reserve which she always assumed when it was necessary to ask her mistress if she would receive a visitor, and Julia hoped for a second that the visitor was Darcy, but at that moment Gaston was climbing Madame Crozon's stairs with Berthe Lestérel.

"I am not at home to anybody," exclaimed Julia d'Orcival, on seeing that her maid presented her a card.

"This gentleman so insisted on being received that I promised to show you his card," replied the maid. "He pretends that he has something of great importance to tell madame."

Julia glanced at the card, and read: "Don José Simancas, General in the service of the Republic of Peru."

"I don't know him," she said, "and have no occasion to see him." Then, after reflecting, she asked: "What is this man like?"

"Oh, he is very gentlemanly looking. Fifty to sixty years of age, of rich and distinguished appearance. Rather too many jewels. But that can be understood, as he is a foreigner. He gave me a louis to hand madame his card."

"It's strange; it seems to me now that I have already heard his name. What can this Peruvian general have to say to me? It is a pretext he adopts to avoid the trouble of being introduced to me."

And as Madame d'Orcival, while saying this, looked at Mariette in a certain way, the shrewd maid at once replied: "I don't think so. He gesticulates and moves about, and I really fancy that he has a communication to make to madame, in regard to—the event of last night."

"Yes, it must be that; and I might perhaps regret not having received him. Show him into the drawing-room, then; I will go there. If Monsieur Darcy comes, you will beg him to wait for me in the gallery—— No, no, not there," continued Julia, quickly, "you will conduct him here."

She had remembered all at once that Golymine had ended his life in the gallery, and that the place would be badly chosen as the scene for a comedy of reconciliation.

Mariette disappeared, and after imposing five minutes' waiting upon the visitor, Julia d'Orcival entered the drawing-room, and replied with a slight nod to the general's bow: "To what do I owe, sir, the honour of seeing you?" she coldly asked.

Simancas' physiognomy had at once displeased her, and she asked herself if this South American warrior were not a police officer in disguise.

The general was well dressed, with a good appearance, but he had peculiar searching eyes. "Madame," he commenced, with an air of ease, "I am not a creditor, a beggar, or a thief, and so that I may explain to you the object of my visit, you will, I hope, seat yourself and allow me to do the same."

By adopting this tone Don José Simancas thought he would intimidate Julia, and he had his reasons for acting thus. But he soon perceived that he was on the wrong tack.

"Monsieur," she retorted, "I have no creditors, I give my alms to beggars through my footman, and I don't fear thieves. You might have dispensed with that misplaced preamble, and I invite you to tell me very quickly what brings you, for I have exceedingly little time to give you."

The Peruvian finding that he had to deal with a spirited party, changed both his tone and his attitude at once. "I had no intention of

offending you, madame," he continued, without further endeavouring to establish himself in a chair. "You will certainly believe it when you learn that I was the companion-in-arms and friend of poor Wenceslas."

"I don't understand," said Julia d'Orcival, although she did understand him very well.

"Of poor Wenceslas Golymine, who died in so tragical a manner."

"What does it matter to me whether you were or were not his friend?"

"It matters very much to you. I knew all Golymine's secrets."

"His secrets were not mine."

"Not all, no doubt; but there were certainly some which he did not hide from you."

"Excuse me, sir. You did not come here, I suppose, to entertain me with relating your adventures with Golymine, who was formerly on good terms with me, I admit it, but whom I had long since ceased to receive. What are you driving at?"

"I wish to ask you if Wenceslas did not confide to you some letters written to him by persons whom these letters seriously compromise."

"And these persons have charged you with the mission of which you acquit yourself so well?"

"Perhaps so. But however that may be, I shall be very grateful to you if you will deliver up those letters, if only in the interest of the count's memory."

"Is that all you have to say to me?"

"No. Golymine, as I know, always carried about him certain papers which it is advisable to destroy. I should like to know if you found them after his death; and if they are in your possession, I should be disposed, in order to obtain them, to pay whatever price you might ask. I can very readily tell you what is in question. I left my country because a conspiracy of which I was the leader failed. Golymine who lived in Peru at the time conspired with me. Subsequently we both thought of returning to Lima to attempt a revolution there. These papers contain the plan of our enterprise, the list of conspirators—and if they fall into the hands of the French police——"

"This time that is everything you wish to say, I think?"

"It remains for me to add that I am rich, and that I do not mind the cost——"

"Enough, sir," said Julia. "I allowed you to talk, because I wished to know how far your audacity would take you. How could you suppose that Count Golymine would deposit any letters with me? And how do you dare to ask me if I abstracted the papers he carried about with him? You think that I rifled his corpse, then? And, to impose on me, you invent I don't know what ridiculous story about Peruvian conspiracies. You must really have been very badly informed respecting me. I don't know who you are, although I remember vaguely having heard the count speak of you. But I am going to talk to you very plainly. It is possible that Monsieur Golymine kept the letters of some women who had loved him; it may even be that he kept them for a bad purpose. But he did not choose me for his confidante. And as to the pretended list of conspirators which preoccupies you so much, if he carried it about him, it is to the Préfecture of Police that you had better go to make your claim."

"Then, madame, the garments worn by Golymine at the time of his death——"

"Have not remained here, sir. And now I must add that I beg of you to retire."

This was said with such an air that an ordinary visitor would have forthwith taken the road to the door, but Don José Simancas was not so easily disconcerted. He remained planted before Julia d'Orcival, and began to look at her as a man looks at a masterpiece in a museum.

"Excuse me, madame," he said with humble politeness, "I was mistaken in you, or rather, I have been deceived by others. We foreigners are apt to commit these blunders, for want of proper acquaintance with Parisian society. Frenchmen have the unpardonable fault of speaking ill of women, and we have the fault, still more unpardonable, of agreeing with them in their appreciations. So, in presenting myself here, I thought——"

"Take care, sir, you are about to address me an impertinence."

"Heaven forbid, madame! I wish, on the contrary, to beg of you to pardon me. And you will forgive me, I am sure, if you will only reflect on the position in which we are placed, I and a few of my compatriots, by the death of this poor count."

"You hold, then, to that story of conspiracy?" asked Julia d'Orcival, ironically.

"Alas! madame, it is but too true. And I can very well admit to you now that the real object of my visit was to know if our unfortunate friend had not deposited some political papers with you. As for the letters from women which Goly mine may have preserved, I care very little about them, and, if I made use of that pretext at first, it was because I dared not at once rely upon you. The secret of the plot we planned to give full independence to our country does not belong to me alone. I see, however, that I unnecessarily alarmed myself, and that I should have done better to have at once told you the truth."

"Yes, for you would have known sooner what to expect. I repeat to you that the count never said a word to me in regard to the affairs in which he might be mixed up. And I beg of you once more to put an end to an interview which no longer has any object."

"That is what I am about to do, madame, while again begging you to accept my apologies. Permit me merely, before taking leave of you, to address you a question, which may, perhaps, appear strange to you. Dare I ask you—how the count was dressed when he came to see you last evening?"

"What does this joke mean?"

"I am not joking, madame, I swear to you. My friends and I have the greatest interest in knowing whether Goly mine wore a pelisse trimmed with fur."

"Yes, sir, he wore one, and, as you may well believe, he has not left it here."

"I thank you for replying to me, madame, and I shall be still more grateful to you if you will keep my visit here a secret. An indiscretion on your part would compromise a great many men who are my friends, and whom you will always find disposed to serve you in everything." Then, without allowing Julia d'Orcival time to add a word, the general bowed courteously and retired.

Julia returned to her boudoir somewhat troubled by the singular words of this so-called Peruvian. "If he was a detective," she thought, "he would have taken a different course in questioning me. This man must

have known Golymine, and Heaven knows what they did together. I don't believe a word about this pretended conspiracy, however. Golymine never occupied himself with politics. What appears clear to me is that this so-called general is not ignorant of the fact that the count had those letters about him. And I conclude that I should risk a great deal by keeping them here. Fortunately, they will not remain here long. The time has come to prepare what I had resolved to carry out on Saturday—to settle with those three women.”

Julia, thereupon, rang for her maid, and asked her if M. Darcy had come; to which Mariette answered that he had not.

“Hold yourself in readiness to take a letter, then,” her mistress said.

“But, madame, it is only four o'clock,” objected the maid. “M. Darcy never comes so early.”

“Who told you that this letter was for him? And what are you meddling for? Go and dress yourself to go out.”

Julia d'Orcival made pretence to feeling indifferent about Gaston, but she asked herself, uneasily, if he would show himself before the day was over, for she felt that if twenty-four hours elapsed without his visit she need never hope to see him again. Now, she thought a great deal of Gaston. In the first place, he pleased her more than she admitted even to herself; but a little more and she would have really loved him. She would certainly have loved him if he had been poor. But her principle was never to confound affairs of the heart with serious affairs. And Gaston was one of the most serious, in the sense given to that word by Julia. He did not count what he spent, and did not take advantage of his generosity to impose his company upon her more than was reasonable. She knew very well that she would with difficulty find another adorer equally lavish and equally accommodating. So she had excellent reasons for regretting this phoenix of protectors. And her pride suffered still more than her interests. To be abruptly abandoned by a young man whom all her rivals envied her, this was an affront to which she could not resign herself without trying to recapture the heart which had escaped her.

“For whose sake has he left me,” she asked herself, as she looked at the stand in which she had placed the letters found the evening before in Golymine's pocket. “He has not broken off with me, as he pretends, merely to become a magistrate. I know him. He is too lazy to have any ambition. I am sure he is going to be married. To whom? I don't know; but I will know, and then I will be avenged. How? I will find a way. Ah! if that marchioness was in question, that marchioness whose letters I have there, my revenge would be ready—a refined revenge. I would let them get married, and afterwards I would show Darcy, by written proofs, that he had married the former mistress of a man he despised. Unfortunately, it isn't probable that he will marry her. She, a titled woman, wouldn't consent to call herself Madame Darcy. But she might let him love her. He goes very often to her house, and little Carneiro, who knows that set by heart, declares that she finds him to her taste. Thus it follows that I have every reason to have an interview with the marchioness, and that I should do wrong to return her all her letters. I wish her to be under obligations to me, but I also wish to retain a weapon against her.”

The striking of a pretty clock in old Dresden interrupted this monologue. “Half-past four,” muttered Julia d'Orcival. “Will he come or not.”

And to stifle her impatience, she opened an elegant writing-desk which

was close to hand. "It is time," she said, in a low voice. "The question is to find out if I have any paper and envelopes without initials. I don't wish these ladies to suspect that I have written to them. Ah! here is what I want. Now it only remains to compose the invitation. I will commence with the marchioness."

Thereupon, she wrote as follows: "Madame, an accident has placed in my hands the letters addressed by you in former times to Count Wenceslas Golymine. I wish to return them to you, but I think it more prudent and becoming not to present myself at your residence, or to receive you at mine. On Saturday next I shall be at the ball at the Opera House, in box No. 27, on the first tier. I shall be there alone, absolutely alone, and I shall wear a black and white domino. I will await you there——"

"Let me see," said Julia to herself, "shall I give her an appointment before or after that woman of the middle classes whom I don't know. Afterwards, that will be best. With the other woman the conversation will last five minutes, at the most, for I intend to return her her letters unconditionally, while with the marchioness the interview will perhaps be long and stormy." Thereupon, she added to her letter, "I shall await you at half past one." Then stopping to reflect: "Suppose she imagined that a trap was being laid for her, and didn't come! I must reassure her by a well-worded postscript. Here it is," she murmured, as she again took up the pen: "It is a woman who writes to you; a woman who will tell you her name if you care to know it, and who only aspires to save you from a great danger. The box-keeper will be warned. It will suffice for you to tell her that the person who is in the box awaits you." And then she signed: "A Friend."

Reading over her composition, Julia said to herself: "She will come. It is impossible that she shouldn't come. I have read the letters. These ladies from Havana have the devil in them. I never wrote anything like it even to the man I loved the best. Those epistles of hers would ruin her without remission. And to regain her correspondence she would, I am sure of it, give one half of her fortune. Golymine was slandered. He might have asked a million of her in exchange for these high-toned letters. And I fancy that if that Peruvian general held them he would derive a good profit from them."

"A quarter to five," murmured Julia, as she looked at the clock, "and Gaston isn't yet here. Come! this means war. Very well, I will wage it. Now for the other. What shall I say to this unknown woman, who has also committed the folly of loving Golymine. She doesn't write in the same style as the marchioness. Her letters are masterpieces of prudence. One would swear she had foreseen that he might have the temptation to use them against her. Indeed, if Golymine hadn't taken the trouble to put the lady's name and address on the packet, no one would ever have known that this tender correspondence came from Madame ——, a name I don't know at all, no more than I know if she is married or a widow. I'm sure, at least, that she is a well-bred and intelligent woman. Will she come to the ball at the Opera House? It is doubtful. Her life is perhaps not so arranged as to allow her a nocturnal excursion. But what does it matter to me? I have nothing to ask of her. What I shall do will be from pure charity. Women ought to stand by each other a little; and it is said that a good action brings good luck. If she doesn't come I will keep the letters, or burn them; but I risk nothing by giving her a

rendezvous in box No. 27, and I don't see why I should change my formula. I have only to copy my note to the marchioness, excepting one word."

Julia returned to her work. "The marchioness at half-past one," she murmured. "The middle-class woman at one o'clock. I do not want to compel her to remain up too late."

When she had finished she read the letters over attentively, folded them, and put the addresses on the envelopes.

"I will post them myself," she said. "It is useless that Mariette should see the names."

Just then Mariette appeared, although her mistress had not rung for her.

"Is Monsieur Darcy there?" asked Julia, hiding the letters by shutting the writing case.

"No, madame," replied the maid. "It is the doctor whom madame sent for."

"What doctor?"

"Dr. Saint-Galmier."

"I don't know him, and I have sent for no doctor. Send this one away."

"Very well, madame. Only I ought to tell madame that this gentleman assures me that he is the friend of Monsieur Darcy. So I thought——"

"That he came on Gaston's account. That would be very surprising. No matter. Let him come in."

An instant later Saint-Galmier showed Madame d'Orcival his placid and smiling face. He had an exceedingly good appearance, this graduate of the University of Quebec, and his physiognomy inspired confidence at the first look.

"Excuse me, madame, for presenting myself like this," he said with engaging frankness. "I am not in the habit of going in search of my patients, but I learned that you were indisposed—I learned it through Monsieur Darcy."

"You know him?"

"Very well, indeed. And last night, at the club to which we both belong, some one related in our presence the fatal event which had just happened at your residence."

"What! last night! it was known already, then?"

"Yes, madame. News soon spreads in Paris. This was brought to us by an eccentric fellow, who is on the watch for all things of the kind, and who happened by chance to be passing your house at the moment when the police officials entered it."

"Ah!" said Julia, surprised and attentive. "Then Monsieur Darcy ——"

"Was much moved, madame; you may well believe it. If he hasn't come to-day, for I suppose he has not come——"

"No, sir, not yet."

"It is because he thought that, under these sad circumstances, it was fitting he should postpone his visit. He abstained from calling from a feeling of delicacy which you will understand. But he thought that you must have been very much tried by so violent a shock, and as he knows that I possess an infallible method for the treatment of nervous affections, he begged of me to see you."

"I am exceedingly obliged to him, and I thank you for the trouble you have taken. But Monsieur Darcy has no doubt charged you to tell me something else."

"He charged me solely to inform myself as to your health, and to offer you my services."

"Very well. You will see him to-day, I suppose?"

"This evening, certainly."

"Very well; will you please to reassure him as to the condition of my nerves? They are very calm. Will you also please, since he has thought proper to take you for his ambassador—will you please to ask him what day he proposes to spend with me?"

"If you permit it, madame, I will call again to-morrow and bring you his reply."

"So be it!" said Julia, after hesitating a little. "I shall be at home at two o'clock."

"You can rely, madame, on my promptitude and my devotion," the doctor hastened to reply, and thereupon he bowed and went away satisfied.

He was not ignorant of the fact that Darcy had definitively broken off his connection with Julia d'Orcival, but he now had what he wished, a pretext to return and see the lady, a means of insinuating himself little by little into her intimacy, and the hope of gaining her confidence. He had been far more adroit than Simancas.

Julia did not know what to think of this visit. She inclined, however, to persuade herself that Gaston, by sending her this messenger, had taken a roundabout method of prompting a reconciliation. Women readily believe whatever they desire. "Yes," she said to herself, "that is it. He has too much pride to take the first step himself. He does it by proxy. And then he wanted to know how I had taken the rupture. When this doctor has told him that I haven't at all the appearance of an Ariadne in tears he will come back. Men are all alike. So I shall see Gaston to-morrow or the day after, but I shall not see him to-day, and I can go back to my correspondence. I have still to write to Mademoiselle Lestérel—for the letters in the third packet are from her sister, and, in truth, I am not going to give them back to her unconditionally. Berthe deserves that I should make her pay dearly for them, just to teach her to put on grand airs with me. When she came here last year to bring me the information I had asked of her, one would have sworn she was afraid of catching the plague. My pictures made her squint, and my carpets burned her feet. And if she came I'll bet that it was simply because she thought that a visit would compromise her less than a written reply. Now, however, if I choose, she would not be quite so ceremonious, for her sister's life is in question. That idiot of a Mathilde married a brute who would kill her at once if he ever learnt she had had a lover. Where can Golymine have met her? I don't know, I'm sure, but one thing is certain, that she was crazy about him, and I have the proof of it. Golymine left her six months ago, but the husband would never admit that extenuating circumstance. So my haughty, prudish boarding-school friend would be at my knees if I exacted it, for she adores her sister."

Poor Berthe little suspected that at the very hour when she saved Madame Crozon by a pious fib—she who had never lied before—Julia d'Orcival was asking herself what price she should set upon the letters of the guilty one.

But Julia, fortunately, did not take pleasure in doing evil for evil's sake, and, besides, the hope of being reconciled with Gaston inclined her to clemency. "After all," she murmured to herself, "why should I bear a spite against these two women? Berthe is right in not seeing me,

since she sticks to playing the artless, and her sister did not steal Golymine from me, for he was no longer with me when she knew him. I have a good mind simply to send back the correspondence. Good, but not to Mathilde's. Her jealous husband would unseal it. To Berthe's? My faith, no. She must, at least, put herself to some trouble. I will write to her to come and get her sister's letters on Saturday, at the ball at the Opera House, box 27—like these other ladies. Yes, but at what hour? Well, I will make her come last. Rendezvous at half-past two for Mademoiselle Lestérel. She will come, I'm sure of that, and she will get clear of it all by merely having to promenade in the lobby while waiting for the time when I shall receive her. It would be funny if some adventure befell her under the mask."

Julia then set to writing, and that being done, she continued: "I will send this letter by Mariette. In that way Berthe cannot deny having received it, since Mariette will give it into her own hands. It is always well to take precautions with prudes."

IV.

MADAME CAMBRY was at home every Saturday, and she had what is called in Paris a salon, that is to say, a circle of her own—a circle selected with great care, comprising amiable financiers, well-bred artists, affable gentlemen, modest savants, and even some statesmen who were not too tiresome. And it is a somewhat rare talent that of attracting and retaining people of the *élite*.

She saw but a few women, chosen, however, from among those who could bring a contingent of wit and beauty to her reunions. She had known how to avoid a great danger; her house was neutral ground where no exclusive influence predominated. There are soirées for card-playing, literary soirées, musical ones, and political ones as well. At Madame Cambry's, however, there was nothing of this sort. All subjects were talked upon there, but poetry was never read, and if there was singing at times, it was accompanied on the piano, and did not last long; unless, indeed, she offered her friends a concert or a ball, which happened three or four times a year, and on these exceptional occasions she considerably extended the circle of her invitations without, however, being lavish with them.

It must be said that Madame Cambry was exactly in the right position to collect at her residence a number of distinguished men of every description. The widow of a man much older than herself, who had left her his fortune, and already rich in her own right, she belonged to that old Parisian *bourgeoisie*, or middle class, which in old monarchical times ranked but just after the nobility. Her maiden name was Barbe Corneul de Cachan. And the Corneuls were already municipal dignitaries under Henri IV. They were even reproached for being furious Leaguers in those days, but for more than two centuries they had rallied to the monarchy, and they had become councillors to the king, and had married their daughters to men of title. Faithful, however, to the traditions of her family, the last of these daughters had chosen for her husband a man whose ancestors had not figured in the Crusades. M. Cambry, an industrial engineer, had acquired a large fortune in a manufacturing business. He was much respected, and his wife had inherited not only

his wealth, but also his connections, just as she had already inherited the wealth and connections of her father.

It will be easily believed that there was no lack of adorers for this widow of twenty-four, who had never proclaimed her intention of remaining inconsolable, and who was charming in every acceptation of the word, for she positively delighted those whom she was willing to receive. Fair, without being of a sickly pallor, she had two brown eyes of incomparable softness, small and regular features, a prepossessing and expressive physiognomy, and a laugh that was sweet and merry like that of a child. Endowed with an elegant and supple figure, she also possessed remarkable intelligence, and knew thoroughly how to conduct herself. During the three years she had had absolute control over herself, and had been able to live as she chose, she had known how to make numerous friends, without giving the least pretext for scandal. And it created some astonishment that she had not yet smiled upon any one of the many suitors for her hand. Evil-disposed folks pretended that this insensibility was not natural, and accused Madame Cambry of ambitious calculations; but in general her propriety was admired, and she was not blamed for deferring her preference.

She lived in the Avenue d'Eylau, in a mansion rising between a yard and a garden, a mansion derived from her husband, and rather too large for her household, which was reasonable, like her life. No gaudy luxuries, no tawdry liveries were seen there. Bad taste was as much proscribed as pedantry. Everything was simple, the widow's furniture, her toilets, her habits. The newspapers never mentioned her in their accounts of "first performances," and the "ladies of the lake," did not even know her name.

M. Darcy and his nephew Gaston were among her faithful friends. The uncle held her in more than ordinary esteem, and the nephew had not denied himself the pleasure of paying her somewhat serious attentions at the commencement of her widowhood. He had during one season even thought of setting himself up as a suitor. Madame Cambry had neither rebuffed or encouraged him, and, as this was not enough for a young man whose heart ignited as quickly as it lost fire when its flame was not fed, Gaston had returned without much regret to a gay life. He had at first even completely deserted the house in the Avenue d'Eylau for Julia's residence on the Boulevard Malesherbes; and if he had of late times showed himself more assiduous at the amiable widow's, it was because he often met Berthe Lestérel there.

Berthe, after having commenced singing at Madame Cambry's in the capacity of an hired professional, had become almost the widow's friend. The distinction of her manners, and, above all, her well-established reputation of perfect virtue, had gained her this well-merited honour. She went to the house every Saturday, and held her place there marvellously well. She knew how to conduct herself like a young lady of the highest society, and had the good taste not to require begging when she was requested to sing an air. Madame Cambry evinced an affectionate esteem for her, and this touched Berthe profoundly. Moreover, the widow Cambry took great care of her, patronised her as it were, and many people thought she was looking for a husband for her. However, Berthe seconded her but indifferently in this enterprise. She received with exemplary modesty and extreme reserve the homage offered to her. She never sought it, and appeared more anxious to take a back seat than to put herself forward. No one could have said that she had particularly distinguished

any one of those who noticed her. Certain incorrigible sceptics concluded from this that her heart was taken already, and that the gracious artiste's chosen one was not of Madame Cambry's society. But the majority really liked and esteemed Mademoiselle Lestérel.

On the Saturday following the death of Wenceslas Golymine, M. Roger Darcy arrived quite early at Madame Cambry's. He had kept his nephew to dine with him, and had brought him with him so as to strengthen the salutary matrimonial ideas which he had tried to infuse into his brain. The Rue Montaigne was on the way to the Avenue d'Eylau, and Gaston was able to go in and dress while his uncle continued his lecture. That evening, by way of exception, the gathering at Madame Cambry's comprised few people. Young folks especially were wanting. There was a ball at the Opera House, and Madame Cambry lived a long way from the Boulevard des Capucines. But Gaston did not go there for the pleasure of meeting acquaintances, and the magistrate cared very little for the young fellows who ordinarily showed themselves in a drawing-room which had as good a standing as any in Paris. Gaston came solely for Berthe, and M. Roger Darcy especially for the widow. He infinitely appreciated her merits, and she inspired him with a sympathy which would have amounted to tenderness, if he had been ever so little disposed to give way to it. But the magistrate had laid out for himself a rule of conduct, from which he did not intend to depart. He had determined that a Darcy should marry; one only, so as not to divide the fortune of the family, and he thought it right that the youngest of the name should charge himself with the perpetuation of the race.

Madame Cambry received them with her accustomed grace, although she was slightly indisposed. She excused herself for being less lively than usual. Assuredly she was no less pretty, and M. Roger Darcy knew how to tell her so in the language of a well-bred man. Gaston, on entering, had caught sight of Mademoiselle Lestérel seated near the piano, and surrounded by people. Lovers have sharp eyes, and recognise their flower at a great distance. They also know how to manœuvre to join them, in spite of all obstacles. So the future judicial *attaché* had not been in the room five minutes before he had found a way to approach Berthe, and enter into an interesting conversation with her.

But prudence is not the distinctive characteristic of people in love, and their intentions are easily divined. It soon happened, as always happens in like cases, that the person seated near the young girl understood that they embarrassed her, and moved away with a discretion not devoid of malice. The woman even assumed a certain affectation in changing their places. However, Berthe found herself *tête-à-tête* with Gaston, a relative *tête-à-tête* of course, for there were several people watching them stealthily.

"Will you allow me to ask you for news of your sister, mademoiselle?" said Darcy, in a low tone.

Those who were looking at him slyly might have heard this commonplace question without attaching any importance to it, and, nevertheless, it was fraught with hidden meaning.

Darcy had had sufficient control over himself to abstain from all efforts to see Berthe since the scene in the Rue Caumartin. He had passed four days dreaming, almost without leaving his apartments. But if his body had remained inactive, his mind had laboured considerably. His love had become "crystallised." The expression is Stendahl's, and it is

impossible to find a better one to express the transformation which had taken place in his ideas.

"My poor sister has not yet recovered from the terrible shock she experienced," replied Mademoiselle Lestérel. "I fear a fresh crisis."

"But the danger is over, is it not?" continued Gaston, lowering his voice.

"I hope so, although everything is to be feared from a man as violent as my brother-in-law is. We are at the mercy of the wretch who denounced Mathilde. He may denounce her again—and I don't know if I shall succeed a second time in saving her."

"You do not know the author of those infamous anonymous letters?"

"No. My sister suspected some one, but she has no proofs—and then, what is the good of searching for this wretch? It would be better to try and repair the harm."

"I should like to help you in that."

"You have already done so. If I had not known that you were there ready to defend my sister, I should perhaps not have had the courage to resist Monsieur Crozon. And I beg of you to believe that, if I have not thanked you before, it was not from want of thinking of you. Mathilde blesses you, and I—I pray for you to God each day."

Gaston became pale with joy, and sought words to express what he felt, but Berthe continued, in a somewhat altered voice: "I should greatly reproach myself if I again had recourse to you; and by staying almost constantly with my sister, I shall, without doubt, succeed in preventing a catastrophe. Her husband, very fortunately, has confidence in me. He has become appeased, and even evinces friendship for me. If I was not there, however, perhaps jealousy would again mislead him. And so I pass my life now at Mathilde's, and I should not have come here this evening if I had not known that——"

Mademoiselle Lestérel blushed and did not utter the words which were certainly in her thoughts. Instead of saying "if I had not known that I should meet you here;" she continued, after a pause: "If I had not feared offending Madame Cambry, who is so kind to me."

Darcy distinctly noticed that short moment of hesitation, and divined why Berthe had paused in her sentence, and why she had finished it with an explanation quite different to the one he awaited. He divined that she had come on his account; that at the first outburst of her heart, she had almost told the truth, and that she had restrained herself on perceiving that so frank a statement would be almost equivalent to an avowal of love. He started with joy, and Berthe Lestérel remained quite abashed, for she felt that she had betrayed herself, and that Darcy would not fail to take advantage of a piece of imprudence, tardily and somewhat clumsily remedied.

"And so," he whispered, "it is to Madame Cambry that I owe the happiness of meeting you this evening; it is solely to please her that you consented to show yourself here; I had hoped that you had not forgotten that blessed hour when, leaning supported on my arm, you answered me as I complained of seeing you so seldom: 'Won't you see me on Saturday in the Rue d'Eylau?' I have forgotten nothing, you see, and I came for your sake—for yours alone."

Darcy said this with the accent which lovers alone know how to put into their words. Passion gives simple words of politeness the value of a burning declaration. Passion finds the right tone without seeking for it,

the tone which goes straight to the soul of the loved woman; it also finds that special diapason, on which vows of eternal love can be exchanged without awakening the suspicions of indifferent listeners. It is thus that the birds alone understand the soft converse they exchange in the spring-time while they twitter under the foliage.

Gaston and Berthe chatted in the midst of the drawing-room as safely as in the depths of a forest, although there were there some people interested in observing them: Madame Cambry, among others, who did not lose sight of them, although she properly did the honours as hostess with remarkable ease. Nevertheless, the moment approached—that supreme moment that decides two destinies, that passing moment in which a word, a look, a gesture binds man and woman for life.

“For my sake alone!” repeated Berthe. “I dare not believe you.”

This was the spark which set fire to the powder; but no din attended the explosion, and no one turned his head when Gaston said, in a low voice: “Don’t you understand, then, that I love you?”

“You love me! you!” murmured Berthe Lestérel. “Allow me not to look seriously upon a declaration which would wound me deeply if I saw anything but a polite formula in it. In the gay world in which you have lived a great deal, I believe a man says to a woman: ‘I love you,’ just as he would have said: ‘You have a charming toilet to-day.’ The compliment is somewhat strong, but it isn’t a precedent, and I should do wrong to get angry. Nevertheless, I am not accustomed to these obliging ways of talking, and they rather shock me. You will laugh at me, but it seems to me that one ought no more to play with certain words than with fire.”

In replying thus, Berthe forced herself to appear lively, but her appearance belied her smile. It was not difficult to divine that she was trying to conceal deep emotion, and that, if she sought to escape Darcy’s attack by a feint, it was because she was not certain that she had the strength to repel his onslaught. Unfortunately, the scene was no longer laid in the Rue de Ponthieu, at the end of a nocturnal promenade brought about by a chance meeting, and Berthe had no longer the resource of curtailing Gaston’s transports by shutting the door in his face. She was reduced to defending herself by affecting an assurance which she completely lacked.

Darcy, little disposed to allow himself to be denied again, availed himself of the advantages furnished by this *tête-à-tête* in a drawing-room where Mademoiselle Lestérel could not escape him, without attracting attention by an abrupt change of place.

“If you knew me better,” he commenced, “you would not accuse me of joking with matters pertaining to the heart. Yes, I have long travelled in the circles where pleasure alone is sought for; but until the day I saw you, I did not live, for to live is to love. I now love, and it is you whom I love—you cannot be ignorant of it. I have never, and I shall never, love but you. What must I do then to prove to you that I don’t lie?”

Berthe remained silent, but her pallor sufficiently showed that this ardent language troubled her to the depths of her soul.

“I know why you doubt me,” continued Gaston quickly. “You doubt me because I have acted with you as I would have acted with a woman on the stage; because I thought I could present myself at your residence without being authorised to do so by you; because I courted you lightly, at a venture. Ah! that was because I did not yet love you. And you will render me the justice to recognise that I already esteemed

you, since I at once bowed to a prohibition which it cost me a great deal to respect. I abstained, I ceased a pursuit which offended you; but I felt that it was impossible for me to live without you, that I belonged to you, and that it depended on you alone to make me the happiest or the most miserable of men. From that instant I swear to you that I have never thought that Mademoiselle Lestérel could be mine if I did not marry her."

At these last words Berthe started, and almost lost countenance to such a degree as to attract the attention of Madame Cambry's guests. She recovered herself quickly, however, and replied in a firm voice: "I believe you, and I thank you for your frankness. You have nothing to reproach yourself for in the past. How could you have divined that I had resolved to remain what I am, an honest girl? You knew nothing of me, except, perhaps, that I was not bad looking, and that I lived by giving lessons and singing at concerts. Now that you know me better, you judge me worthy to bear your name. I am profoundly touched by the honour you do me, but Monsieur Darcy cannot marry Berthe Lestérel. Everything opposes it, everything separates us, and you would have the right to think badly of me if I took advantage of a passing impulse which you would regret in the future."

"If you loved me you would not talk like that," said Gaston, much moved by the young girl's proud language.

Berthe took care not to reply to this indirect question. She was too afraid of betraying herself. So, instead of explaining herself as to the nature of the sentiment that Gaston had inspired in her heart, she began a narrative which he dared not interrupt.

"I am the daughter of a soldier," she said, "of a volunteer who gained his epaulets by bravery, and retired when a major. My mother, whom I lost on coming into the world, was a country woman. It was at the price of the greatest privations that Commandant Lestérel, having only his pay to live on, was able to bring us up, my sister and myself, at a boarding-school, and when he died he left us no fortune. Mathilde, fortunately, had just married, and it is to her that I owe having been able to finish my education, and acquire the knowledge of music, which assures my independence. She was everything to me, and I placed all my affection on her, all the gratitude that I before gave to my father. I shall never leave her, and I would joyfully give my life to save her a sorrow."

"I know it," murmured Gaston, who thought of the conjugal scene which he had heard, if not witnessed.

"Since chance—a chance which I bless—has initiated you into our troubles," continued Berthe, "you ought to understand that I am not free, that Mathilde has need of my support, that I ought to hold myself always ready to defend her, and, if it is necessary, to sacrifice myself for her. Do you wish to know to what extent I would carry my devotion? You heard that infamous accusation which Monsieur Crozon repeated, blinded by jealousy. Very well, I swear to you if it had been necessary for my sister's salvation, I would have said that she had been taken for me, that it was I who was guilty. We resemble each other sufficiently for that; the writers of the anonymous letters might have made the mistake. And I should have resigned myself to the loss of my reputation, rather than have abandoned Mathilde to her husband's vengeance."

While talking thus, Mademoiselle Lestérel became extremely animated. her cheeks were rosy, her eyes glistened; never had she been more beautiful.

"You no doubt ask yourself why I tell you all this," she continued gently. "Don't you guess? Don't you understand that I cannot—that I ought not to marry, as my poor sister has no one but me to protect her? The storm has passed by; but not the danger. We have an implacable enemy, an enemy all the more formidable since he works in the dark, and we do not know him. To-morrow, perhaps, he will denounce Mathilde again, and then——"

"Do you think, then, that I shall not defend her?" said Gaston, warmly. "Do you set so little value on my love, that you disdain to put it to the test by associating with me in your efforts to protect a woman against the violence of a furious husband, and the calumnies of a coward?"

"You are the most generous of men," replied Berthe, without seeking to hide her emotion. "But you belong to a family whose honour is without a stain, and there are undertakings which you are prohibited from attempting, for they would compromise your name. I cannot bear that name so long as I am threatened with the misfortune I fear. If, in a fit of anger, Monsieur Crozon killed my sister, I wish to suffer alone."

All this was not said in a way to discourage Darcy, who indeed felt his love increasing at each word spoken by Mademoiselle Lestérel. He now realised that her heart was full of noble sentiments, and he admired the high character, the proud simplicity of this young girl, who preferred to remain poor and lonely rather than expose her husband to a catastrophe. And, more than ever, he was resolved to marry her, even if to succeed in doing so it were necessary for him to mix himself up in the affairs of the sea-captain.

He was about to swear that nothing would make him renounce his design; to again protest that he loved her to distraction; and, in spite of his worldly experience, he was about, no doubt, to betray by his words and gestures, more expressive than was proper, the secret of this long chat, which was hardly in place in Madame Cambry's drawing-room.

Berthe Lestérel felt the peril of the situation, and did not permit him to throw additional fervour into a conversation which was already too impassioned.

"We are being noticed a great deal," she said, changing her tone. "I beg of you to talk of something else. Is it true that 'Don Juan' is to be brought out again at the Opera?"

"'Don Juan!'" repeated Gaston, astounded; "I—I don't know."

"I ask you that because I adore Mozart's music," continued Berthe in a louder tone. "Would you believe it, I have never heard his masterpiece on the stage? I know it by heart, but, I so rarely go to the theatre, and it is so long since it was played——"

And as Darcy, still bewildered, tried to find a sentence to carry on this conversation, which was intended to throw inquisitive folks off the scent, Berthe, becoming again entirely mistress of herself, continued gaily: "I have loved Mozart ever since I existed. When quite a child, when I was taking my first lessons on the piano, it happened that I once heard my professor execute a part of the 'Magic Flute.' I was so enraptured with it that the next day, as soon as it was light, I slipped into the music-room, upset all the music until I found the air which had charmed me, and set bravely to work, executing it with one finger. I made so much racket that the mistress of the school ran to discover the cause, and wished to punish me for butchering the masters instead of studying my lessons. At this I revolted, and I believe, Heaven forgive me! that I gave her a slap.

It caused a great fuss, and I was very nearly sent away. My sister came and asked forgiveness for me, however, and I heartily promised never to cause her any sorrow again."

"Really," said Gaston, smiling; and he felt the necessity of deceiving the attentive eyes of the neighbours, especially those of the feminine ones; "really, mademoiselle, it is hard for me to believe that you ever fought any one."

"For the reason that the occasion has never presented itself. If you think that Heaven has gifted me with angelic patience you completely delude yourself. I am very calm in appearance, but I have terrible fits of anger at times."

"You do not expect, I suppose, to persuade me that you would go so far as to commit a murder in one of your spasms of fury?"

"You are laughing, but I talk seriously. Of course, I hope very much that I shall never kill any one, and yet, one day Monsieur Crozon raised his hand against my sister; I seized a knife which was within my reach; we were at table, and if Mathilde had not stopped my arm, I don't know what would have happened. Let us drop that unpleasant subject, however. I merely wanted to show you that no water is more dangerous than still water, and that I have a great defect. I am excessively nervous and subject to sudden passion. Thus I mistrust myself and avoid occasions when I might give way to myself in an outburst of anger. But here is Madame Cambry coming in this direction, and I quite believe she is going to ask me to sing. I should not dare to refuse her, and, nevertheless, I should like to leave here early, for my sister is still indisposed, and it is absolutely necessary that I should see her this evening before I return home."

"I hope," said Gaston, "that you will not expose yourself, as you did the other night. Promise me that you will be accompanied, or permit me to——"

"Oh, do not be afraid," interrupted Mademoiselle Lestérel; "I have kept the cab which brought me. It will take me to the Rue Caumartin, and from thence to the Rue de Ponthieu." And as she saw plainly that Darcy was about to return to an exciting subject, she hastened to add: "Besides, I have now something to defend myself with. I am armed for the war. See the pretty poniard-fan my brother-in-law has given me. I, in fact, related my adventure of the other night to Monsieur Crozon. I related it to him—in part, for it is well understood I did not speak to him of you. And when he knew that I had been persecuted by an impertinent fellow—I did not tell him the name of my persecutor, for he would have gone and asked him to explain his conduct; but when he knew the danger I had run, he made me a present of this singular object, which he bought on leaving Yeddo. I carry it to please him; and this evening he will be delighted to notice that I don't part with it, even to go into society. It is rather ridiculous for me thus to act the part of the Andalusian murderer of the novels. Fortunately, all those who see me play with this murderous instrument take it for a simple fan."

Darcy had a taste for curiosities, and examined with interest the weapon brought by the irascible whale-man from Japan. It was a steel blade, very solid and very sharply pointed, concealed in a sheath which had the form of a closed fan, the handle, set off with a silk cord, looking exactly like the base of a fan.

Berthe took it out of Darcy's hands. Madame Cambry was coming towards her, and Gaston decided, very much to his regret, to rise. The

sweet confab was over. He would have liked it to last for ever ; but, although he had obtained no avowal, he quite hoped that Mademoiselle Lestérel would allow herself to be moved sooner or later on, and he did not repent of having advanced so far as to ask her to marry him.

The gracious widow paid no attention to the fan that Berthe held in her tapering fingers, but said, with a charming smile : “ Are you going to sing us nothing this evening, my dear Berthe ? I have begged my friends not to keep me up late, but I don’t wish to deprive them of the pleasure of hearing you. Oh, I don’t ask anything elaborate of you. I know that you are tired, and that you also wish to leave before midnight. An air, nothing but an air ; the ‘ Aragonese Serenade ’ for instance. You sing it so well, and Monsieur Gaston Darcy is an excellent accompanist.”

Berthe did not have to be begged, Gaston still less ; and they took their places at the piano, which was near them.

Some few of the frequenters of Madame Cambry’s house had already gone off in the English style, that is to say, without taking leave. In this pleasant house, absolute liberty was the rule, and all made use of it as suited them best. When there was music, one was even not obliged to listen to it.

Only a few intimate friends remained when Berthe Lestérel went to the piano, close to Gaston, who would not have consented to exchange the narrow stool, on which his duties as accompanist obliged him to sit, for the chair of the President of the Republic.

The young widow had stationed herself in a corner beside M. Roger Darcy, who showed himself exceedingly attentive, and whom she appreciated at his full value. She liked his original mind, his picturesque language ; she liked even the oddities of his character, and never was the amiable magistrate in better spirits than when in private conversation with Madame Cambry. They seemed to have been made for each other, and if the magistrate had been younger, their reciprocal sympathies might very well have resulted in marriage. Certain people even claimed that the lady had a weakness for men of mature years, when they were rich, intelligent, and well established in the world. Whatever may have been her secret feelings, she and he remained on terms of companionship such as cannot exist between a man and a woman, except that neither of them has a thought of love.

“ She is charming, your little *artiste*,” said M. Darcy, in a low voice. “ An adorable face and figure, perfect distinction of manner, and, with that, not the least appearance of coquetry. Where was this marvel fabricated ? Was it at the Conservatoire ? ”

“ No,” replied Madame Cambry, smiling, “ she is a discovery of mine. And I assure you that your nephew blesses me for having discovered her.”

“ My nephew ! Can he by chance be showing her any attentions ? That is improbable. He has determined to marry.”

“ I thought he was so a little already——”

“ Not in the least—since last Sunday.”

“ Better late than never, then. Very well, but why should he not marry Berthe ? ”

“ Are you talking seriously ? ”

“ Why, certainly. Berthe has all the endowments of the sex, all the talents, and all the virtues. She is poor, it is true. What does that matter, since your nephew is rich ? ”

“ Not enough so for two.”

"If that is your opinion, you relieve me of an illusion. I thought that you were not opposed to marriages of inclination. But, hush! listen to Berthe as a singer, since you will not have her for a niece."

Gaston had played a short prelude, and Mademoiselle Lestérel commenced singing the sweet air, the words of which would have been better placed in her lover's mouth than in her own:

"Should frolic fancy e'er impel
The maiden of my heart
To let her own sweet heart rebel,
With sorrow's pangs she'll smart——"

"Oh! oh!" whispered M. Darcy; "the piece is composed for the occasion. Did you choose it?"

"Yes," murmured the widow. "It pleases me very much, and Berthe sings it delightfully."

The young girl's golden voice continued:

"Ah! swiftly to her balcony
Must hie my fawn-ey'd maid,
Whene'er, beneath her window, I
Sing my soft serenade;
Ay, swiftly hie, or else——"

"One would think that it was written expressly for them," whispered the widow.

"Decidedly," said M. Roger Darcy in her ear, "you are anxious to secure your friend's happiness."

"And the happiness of your nephew. Never will he meet so accomplished a woman."

"Excuse me. I know of one."

"Oh, then, present me to her."

"Impossible."

"Why so?"

"Because that woman is yourself."

"That may be called a compliment at short range."

"It is not a compliment—it is an overture."

"And so, it is your opinion that I should do well to marry Monsieur Gaston Darcy?"

"On my soul and conscience, yes."

"I was not in the least expecting this proposal, especially from you."

"Does it offend you?"

"No, certainly not. Your name is one of those that the most fastidious woman would be happy and proud to bear. But Monsieur Gaston has never thought of me."

"How do you know that?"

"In any case, he can no longer think of me, for he loves Berthe. That is very evident. And I am astonished that you are not more clear-sighted—you! an investigating magistrate! You only know, then, how to read the hearts of those under suspicion? And when you are outside of your office, in order to make you understand, it is necessary that avowals should be made to you!"

While talking thus, Madame Cambry looked fixedly at M. Roger Darcy, and the magistrate started like a man who sees all at once an horizon open before him quite unexpectedly.

"Moreover," continued the young widow, "I declare to you very frankly that your nephew, even were he free, would not suit me at all. I render justice to his merits, but I greatly distrust his defects. He has lived too much in gay society. It would be necessary to convert him, and I would not charge myself with the attempt. There is nothing but love which can metamorphose a fast man into a steady husband. Berthe will succeed in that. As for me, I should trouble myself in vain."

"Upon my word you are perhaps right," said the uncle, gaily. "I wish Gaston to marry, but I don't wish to bring misfortune upon any one."

"Why are you so anxious that he should marry?"

"Because—you will laugh at me—because I intend that France shall possess some of the name of Darcy for ever. At present there remain but two, and if one of those two is not the founder of a branch, there will soon remain none at all. Gaston is the younger; it is for him to devote himself."

"Devote himself? Then you look upon marriage as a sacrifice. You are truly gracious to us women!"

"Oh! I am speaking of myself, who am old."

"How old are you, then?"

"Forty-five, alas!"

"I should never have thought it."

"You are very kind. As for me, I perceive it every day."

"And as for me, I find you younger than your nephew. It is not years which make a man old, it is the use which he makes of his heart."

"Mine has not travelled as much as Gaston's, and, certainly, it has not travelled in the same country. It is none the less in retirement, and I doubt if it can be brought out again. Unfortunately, I have no taste for women of my age, and a young one would not have me. A girl without a dowry would perhaps resign herself, but such resignations cost dear to the husband who accepts them."

"Not so loud; you interfere with the singing," interrupted Madame Cambry, maliciously. "Listen to that pretty finish."

"The maiden then shall gently bend,

And very softly sigh:

'Oh! tell me what thou wilt, my friend,

Whate'er thou wilt, will I.'

'Two kisses, then, I'll snatch, I vow,

Two kisses—ay—I'll dare

To press one on thy snowy brow,

And one upon thy hair!'"

The song was finished, and the applause prevented M. Roger Darcy from continuing to preach against the men of his age who faced the perilous chances of marriage.

"Seek and you will find," said Madame Cambry to him, as she rose to go and congratulate Mademoiselle Lestérel. And she added, softly: "Look at your nephew. He is radiant."

She did not exaggerate. Gaston was glowing. He fancied he had divined that Berthe was thinking of him when she said tenderly to the sweetheart of the song: "Whate'er thou wilt, will I." And he might have answered without a lie that he was dying with a desire to kiss a snowy brow and golden hair, for Berthe was as fair as a lily and as blonde as ripened wheat. His joy so worked upon him that he had struck some false notes in accompanying the serenade.

"That music is delightful, and you give it an expression which renders it still more touching," said the young widow, as she pressed Berthe Lestérel's hands. "You put your whole soul into it, I am sure; and I am also sure that Monsieur Gaston Darcy prefers it to all the grand pieces sung by our divas."

Gaston was silent. His eyes spoke for him. Berthe cast down her own and seemed abashed. One would have said that she regretted having sang with so much warmth.

"If you are not too tired, my dear little one," continued Madame Cambry, "sing us one more air—whatever you please."

The young girl hesitated a little; but one of the pieces she espied on the piano suited her voice and her situation, no doubt, for she placed it in front of Gaston, who knew it. It was a melancholy air written by Martini, a master of the last century. When Berthe began to slowly sing the words to which it goes so well, it seemed to her that she was addressing herself to Gaston, and that she begged of him not to love her.

"The pleasures of love in a moment are gone,
But the pangs of the heart they last for aye,"

breathed the young girl, and in her accent there was a prayer.

Was it intentionally that she had chosen this song so cruelly true? Gaston thought so, and his face became somewhat clouded. He set to thinking that a passion, even shared, does not shelter those who experience it from misfortune, and that Berthe Lestérel was perhaps right in predicting a gloomy future for their amours. The air died away like a wail, and more than one woman present furtively wiped away her tears. Madame Cambry herself was moved, although she was supposed to know only by hearsay of the pleasures and sorrows in question. She was moved so deeply, indeed, that she kissed Berthe on both cheeks.

As she reconducted her to her seat, after thanking and complimenting her, a footman who had just entered the room advanced respectfully, and said a few words to her in a low voice. Gaston then saw Madame Cambry turn to the young girl, say something, and leave the room with her. Much surprised and also a little disquieted, he approached his uncle, who spoke these very sensible words to him: "My dear boy, I can't guess any more than you can why Mademoiselle Lestérel has left us so abruptly, but I think we should do well to leave too. Madame Cambry hasn't hidden from me that she is in need of rest, and that her best friends would please her if they did not stay here too late to-night. Besides, I want to chat with you; and as you are going, I suppose, to the ball at the opera house—"

"Oh! I am not at all decided about going there," interrupted Gaston. "But here is Madame Cambry returning, and I wish to know—"

The young widow came straight to him, and said sadly: "My poor Berthe is obliged to leave us. Her sister has been suddenly taken with a nervous attack. It must have been serious, for Berthe almost fainted at the first words spoken to her in a low voice by the person who came for her. She is excessively sensitive, that dear child, but she is courageous. I offered to have her accompanied—to send my doctor to her sister's. She would listen to nothing, however, and has gone away alone, with a maid, in a cab, when she could have taken my brougham, as I proposed to her. What devotion! And who would believe that that frail young girl had so much energy! I already loved her with all my heart; now I admire her."

"If you found yourself in such a position, you would do like her, dear madame," said M. Roger Darcy. "Don't you prove to us this evening that you are really courageous? As for me, I think you heroic to sit up in spite of your headache, and I will not abuse your heroism. I shall, therefore, take my leave of you; and I carry off Gaston with me, so as to preach morality to him on the way."

Madame Cambry did not try to detain either the uncle or the nephew. She offered each of them one of her beautiful hands, and said to the uncle, with an expressive smile: "Shall you seek?"

"Yes, since you say that I shall find," replied the magistrate.

Gaston did not understand these words, nor did he try to understand them. He thought of Berthe only; and when he was seated in M. Roger Darcy's carriage it was necessary, in order to awaken him from his reverie, for his uncle to attack him in these very plain terms: "My boy, I see your game clearly now. It is Madame Cambry who has opened my eyes. You are crazy about that little girl who sings so well that more or less Aragonese serenade in which there are so many kisses. I admit that she is adorable. But marry her! the deuce! how fast you go!"

"My dear uncle," replied Gaston, "you said to me not long since, 'Provided your betrothed is neither of doubtful honesty, nor of a family with blemished character——'"

"And I don't gainsay it; but the question is to show to me that Mademoiselle Berthe comes under the required conditions. In the first place, who are these Lestérels? I know of a forest of that name between Toulon and Nice. But that does not seem to me sufficient."

"Her sister has married a captain in the merchant service. Her father was a major."

"Julia d'Orcival is also the daughter of an officer. And then, my dear boy, I don't believe much in the virtue of young ladies who live alone."

"It isn't her fault if she is an orphan."

"Agreed, but her beauty exposes her to trials, which a chaperon would be of use in warding off. Why doesn't she live with her sister, since her sister is married?"

Gaston did not reply, and for a good reason, to this question.

"If you are silent," continued his uncle, "it is because you have nothing satisfactory to tell me. But I will not abuse my advantages to lengthen my sermon. A brougham from Binder's is not a judge's chair. Come to-morrow to my house, at noon, if you are capable of rising so early. We will chat seriously about you, and perhaps about myself. Now, shall I put you down in the Rue Montaigne, or on the boulevard?"

"On the boulevard, uncle."

"Very well. You are going to the ball at the opera house, I see. Your case isn't a desperate one yet."

V.

WHATEVER Gaston's uncle may have said, the young fellow had not at all decided about going to the ball at the opera house, and, if he asked to be put out on the boulevard, it was because he wished to go to the club to consult his usual oracle, the wise captain, who gave such good advice. He had a deal of news to tell him, and a multitude of questions to ask of him.

But it was written that all his plans should be upset. At the club he found no one to talk to. The ball had created a perfect void there. There only remained some whist-players, and one of them told Darcy that Nointel, derogatory to his usual habits, had followed the younger members to the opera house. On learning this, Darcy, who was anxious to talk to his friend, decided to join him. The theatre was near by. By chance it neither rained nor snowed, and the pavement was dry, so Darcy walked the short distance and entered the theatre.

It was but half-past twelve. Dancing had already commenced, but the boxes were but sparsely occupied, and the only costumed women to be met were such as had come to dance outrageous quadrilles. The dominos were few in number.

Darcy thought he would find the captain in the box held by the club, and so he took his way to the first tier on the left, without entering the lobby or loitering in the corridors. He fancied that Julia would come to the ball, and did not care to meet her. Not that he feared being entrapped again by this enslaver of hearts—he was now proof against her seductions—but he wished to avoid a disagreeable explanation.

In the box he found two or three clubmen of his acquaintance, but Nointel had just gone out. Lolif and Prébord were there, and Prébord went away as soon as he saw Darcy enter. They had already met at the club since their altercation, and had behaved coldly towards each other; still, by a sort of tacit agreement, they had entered into no explanation in regard to their meeting in the Rue Royale. They each understood that the conversation would soon turn to acrimony, and neither the one nor the other was anxious to engage in a quarrel. Prébord was not pugnacious, and Darcy, although he willingly fought duels, feared to compromise Mademoiselle Lestérel.

"My dear fellow," cried Lolif to him, "come here and I will show you something strange."

And as Darcy remarked that he was looking for the captain, the amateur reporter said: "You will not find him. Nointel is an eccentric fellow who does nothing like other chaps. I will bet that he has gone down into the house, and that he is amusing himself looking at the Clodoches dance. Wait here for him. You will be more sure of seeing him, for he will return; and I promise you that you will not lack amusement in the meanwhile. Come here by me, in front of the box, where there is still a place. Within half-an-hour we shall be overrun with the women these gentlemen will bring, and then I could no longer study the mystery I perceive over yonder."

"Is there a mystery?" asked Gaston, laughing. "Go for the mystery. I have some time to lose, for I have decided to wait here for the captain."

"Well, look over there, at the box just opposite ours, on the other side of the theatre."

"Good! I have it! And I see there—a woman all alone."

"A woman in a black and white domino," said Lolif.

"Yes. Black on one side and white on the other. Ah! the lace mask is the same. One side of the face black, the other side white. The gloves match the rest. One black and one white. That half-and-half costume is somewhat funny; but if that is your mystery it is soon cleared up. The lady hasn't come to remain on guard in her box, like a soldier in his sentry-box. She will soon go to the dancing-hall or into the lobby, and it will be known who she is. We have some folks here who are well-in-

formed on such matters. The old stagers are well-known, the new ones are rare, and whenever one shows herself she is soon marked out."

"I'll bet that this one is neither a new nor an old-comer. I'll, indeed, bet that she is a woman of fashionable society."

"The deuce! what a scent! How do you know that, I beg of you?"

"She is alone. So she awaits some one."

"That is a fine reason. It seems to me, on the contrary, that if she were a woman of fashionable society she would have every interest in not exposing herself to remark. She would keep herself at the back of her box, and she wouldn't have chosen a domino which attracts attention."

"That is just where the mystery lies."

"Ah! this time it is too much, Lolif, my friend; your imagination runs away with you. And see! here come General Simancas and Dr. Saint-Galmier, who take their places in the box next to your fair stranger's. Go and see them. You will see the motley domino at short range then. You might even listen through the partition, in case this solitary woman received any visits."

"No, no. Simancas and Saint-Galmier are too suspicious to my mind."

"Bah! they as well! Have you discovered that they have committed any crime?"

"Not yet; but I think them very capable of committing one. Those fellows have strange ways. Thus, this evening, instead of coming into the club box, they have hired one for themselves alone."

"That only proves that they don't like long stories."

"Well, well! you are making fun of me! A day will come, however, when you will acknowledge that I was right. Ah! here is a visitor for the party-coloured woman."

"Yes, a domino; all black that one. What is there so extraordinary about that?"

"You haven't noticed, then, that the black and white domino rose up as soon as she saw the other woman enter. If it was an expected friend, she would have made her sit down beside her. And see, they are both disappearing into the little room at the back of the box."

"And it seems that this eclipse perplexes Simancas," said Darcy, "for he is getting up to look over the partition. He will have his trouble for nothing. The two women have become completely invisible."

"Good! But could you tell me to what social category the visitor belongs?"

"No, 'pon my word! And you?"

"Oh, I know it. She is one of the upper classes, but she doesn't frequent the opera house ball—perhaps she is even a provincial. In fact, that is seen by her dress, which absolutely lacks elegance. Instead of the lace veil in the present style, she has a simple velvet mask on her face. A woman must come from Montmorillon or from Ménéilmontant to wear a mask like that. And instead of having put a hood on to a ball costume, she has muffled herself in a classic domino of former days, a sort of wrapper which she has no doubt hired of a costumier."

"Decidedly, my dear fellow, you are of the greatest ability. You will soon rival Zadig."

"Zadig! I know no detective or commissary of that name," said Lolif, who was less acquainted with the writings of Voltaire than with the reports of the *Police Gazette*.

"He is a celebrated English detective," retorted Darcy, with superb phlegm.

"Ah! really? Well, if you know him, you will please me by presenting me to him when he comes to Paris."

"I shall not fail to do so, and I am certain that you will astonish him."

"Don't laugh. I shall perhaps teach him some tricks he doesn't know. But, ah! there is the half-and-half re-appearing—all alone. The conference in the little room didn't last long, and I commence to believe that the other woman is merely her maid, who brought her something she had forgotten—her fan, perhaps. It seems to me that she didn't have one when she entered the box, and she has one now—on her knees."

"What eyes you have! you will finish by telling me the colour of hers."

"You had better not dare me. Ah! a new visitor! Another woman in a domino."

"The same, of course," said Darcy. "There is something which upsets your suppositions. If it was a maid, her mistress would not rise twice in less than five minutes to receive her. And you see that she is again going with her into the depths of the little room."

"It is not proved that it is the same," growled Lolif, greatly vexed.

And he turned an enormous pair of opera-glasses upon the empty box, but the prolonged use of this telescope brought him no discovery. The two dominos did not show themselves again.

"In your place," said Darcy, ironically, "I should go out and mount guard at the door of that mysterious meeting place. No one could enter or leave without passing under your inspection."

"That is what I shall do a little later on," replied Lolif with a shrewd air. "For the present, I prefer to watch Simancas and Saint-Galmier, who to me seem to be spying upon their neighbour."

"Then I will leave you to your interesting occupation."

"You are going; but it is only one o'clock. The ball has hardly commenced."

"I am going in search of Nointel."

"And you will bring him back here?"

"Perhaps. Work away at the mystery till I return, that is, if I do return."

In reality, Darcy had not the least desire to resume a conversation which bored him. He had only come for the captain, and he promised himself to go home to bed if he did not succeed in finding him. He descended in the first place to the ball-room, where he only saw some people of both sexes in disguise, and then he passed into the lounge, which abounded in people on the look out for adventures. Nointel was not there, however, and after a search of three quarters of an hour Darcy was about to go away, when he found himself face to face with his undiscoverable friend, at the entrance to the corridor of the first tier.

"Well, this is lucky!" he exclaimed, as he took Nointel by the arm, "here have I been looking for you, and I don't know how long. Where the deuce were you?"

"I'll tell you. But, in the first place, what have you to say to me? Have you come to announce to me that you have patched up a reconciliation with Julia?"

"You know very well that I haven't."

"I know nothing at all about it. For four days I haven't seen you—and four nights—four times more time than is necessary to commit a folly."

"Don't be uneasy. I care as little for Julia now as I do for the first cigar I smoked at college."

"Well," said Nointel, "I ought to inform you that she is here. I shouldn't be surprised if she has even come for you, for she came alone, as early as twelve o'clock, which is contrary to her habits. I ascended the main staircase behind her, and saw her face when she raised her veil to look at herself in a glass. She saw me also, and took to flight. I fancy that she wasn't pleased at my recognising her."

"She hasn't worn mourning long for poor Golymine. But that doesn't concern me, and I shall get away; it is understood that I am not at all anxious to meet her."

"You won't do so. She has taken up her position in a box on the first tier, opposite that of the club, where you have no doubt been."

"I left it but a little while ago."

"Then, you must have perceived Madame d'Orcival. She has the Peruvian general and the practitioner from Canada as neighbours."

"And she wears a black and white domino?"

"Exactly."

"What, so it is Julia who has dressed herself in the Prussian flag! And that fool of a Lolif, who takes her for a great lady, and invents romances in connection with her. If you want to laugh, you have only to go and find him, and listen to his foolishness. As for myself, I have had enough of it, and so I am off. Julia has only to come prowling round here for a scene to ensue. I will call on you to-morrow and ask you for some advice."

"In regard to your approaching marriage."

"Yes. I have almost decided to double the cape, but a good pilot is never superfluous."

"*A la disposicion de usted!* I am speaking in Spanish to you because I just escorted a Havanese marchioness." And, as Darcy pricked up his ears, the captain continued, laughing: "Yes, my dear fellow, such as you see me, I have given my protection to a noble lady who implored it. Just now, as I entered the corridor, I espied a woman, whom some nice leeches were pressing too closely, and who at once grasped my arm. I was at first led to believe that I had made a conquest. I had but a polite acknowledgment of my services, however, and the lady left me twenty steps from the spot where I had taken her defence. But by her voice, her accent, and her hair like a raven's wing, I plainly recognised Madame de Barancos."

"The incomparable marchioness at the opera house ball!" exclaimed Darcy, in surprise. "That's tough. But why not, after all? She is a little eccentric, this more-than-millionaire crook. What astonishes me the most is that she should have come without an escort. Perhaps she was in search of that coxcomb, Prébord. Women have such strange tastes."

"By the way in which you speak of her, I see that it isn't she whom you mean to marry," said Nointel.

"Neither she nor Madame Cambry. I will tell you my case to-morrow. But I am going to leave now for fear of Julia. Adieu! May Lolif be easy with you!"

The captain let his friend go without trying to detain him. He knew that Madame d'Orcival was not far distant, and feared a meeting which might lead to a relapse. He was almost inclined to go off himself, for the ball amused him but little; but, although he was not a seeker of scandals,

Madame de Barancos' presence at this fête, a little too "mixed" for a marchioness, did not cease perplexing him exceedingly. Not liking society he did not visit her, but he knew her perfectly well by sight and reputation; he observed her from a distance, and she interested him as a problem.

To tell the truth all Paris knew this magnificent ereole, who was seen on all sides, and who, wherever she showed herself, reigned without a rival, by grace of beauty, fortune, and birth. The daughter of a Spanish grandee and the widow of a captain-general, governor of the island of Cuba, the Marchioness de Barancos had lived in France during the last three years, leading an almost regal existence. She even seemed to wish to establish herself there, for she had purchased a superb mansion contiguous to the Parc Monceau, as well as a magnificent country residence and estate in Normandy. An intrepid horsewoman and indefatigable huntress, she was as fond of the arts as of violent exercise. She was to be seen of a daytime driving four horses in the Bois de Boulogne, and in the evening absorbing music at a theatre. She received a great deal of company and gave frequent fêtes, the description of which often entertained the readers of society journals for a full week. But she also had her intimate friends chosen among all the aristocracies, the great names of France, and the artistic and literary celebrities. Youth, elegance, and intelligence had their entry at her residence as at Madame Cambry's. And these two widows resembled each other in still one more point: they saw few women.

But, without speaking of the difference in fortune and origin, they were not like each other either in character or habits. To the same extent that Madame de Barancos was ardent, haughty and capricious, so was Madame Cambry calm, modest, and staid. Nointel, who often amused himself by comparing them, had surnamed them the torrent and the rivulet. It is well understood that the marchioness was the torrent. But this torrent had not yet caused any ravages.

Although released from all bonds by her exceptional position and widowhood, Madame de Barancos conducted herself very properly, and her eccentricities never amounted to compromising imprudences. Indeed, she lived in the broad light of day, so to speak, and it would have been more difficult for her than for any other woman to have hidden weaknesses. Too many eyes observed her—the eyes of all her adorers.

However the captain could not get over having met her alone at the Opera House ball. It was not possible for him to deceive himself. He had often chanced to exchange a few words with her at a charity fair, where she liked to have charge of a stall, and, in speaking, she had a slight accent which one could not forget or mistake.

Nointel was certainly not the man to take advantage of the little secret which chance had given him; but it pleased him as a philosopher to study the character and actions of women. So he began to stroll about the corridors, in the hope of meeting the marchioness again, and this time on the arm of an escort. He flattered himself that, although the domino she wore was devoid of any particular sign, he should know her by her figure, her carriage, or voice, after following her somewhat closely for a few moments. Still he did not flatter himself that he would know her at a distance, from one side of the auditorium to the other, if she had sought refuge in a box, and for this reason he thought it useless to go and take a place among his friends of the club.

He was in for a long walk. It was in vain that he went through the lounge and the corridors on all the tiers, he saw nothing of Madame de Barancos, and, at the expiration of an hour, seeing that he had embarked on a foolish undertaking, he thought of beating a retreat. He was going towards the grand staircase to reach the exit, when he was knocked against by a gentleman, whom he pushed back with his shoulder, and whom he was about to address in somewhat vigorous terms. He perceived in time, however, that this gentleman was Lolif, and his bad humour turned to sarcasm. "Where the deuce are you running so fast?" he asked. "Has somebody been assassinated?"

"Not that I know of," replied the amateur detective, "but I am on the track of a curious affair."

"Has Golymine been resuscitated? Have you recognised him under the plumed helmet of a Clodoche?"

"Don't joke, my dear fellow. Without leaving the club's box, I have discovered ——"

"A new planet?"

"A certain black and white domino——"

"It is very curious, in fact," said Nointel, in the most serious manner possible.

He knew the woman hidden under this costume, and rejoiced to see this booby of a Lolif in pursuit of a mystery which was nothing but a mystification.

"It isn't that which is curious," continued the amateur reporter; "it is the woman's incomprehensible conduct. She is alone, in front of a box on the first tier, opposite ours. From time to time there comes another woman in black. The black and white one rises, and goes and talks with the visitor behind the curtain at the back. The conference lasts sometimes five minutes, now a quarter-of-an-hour, now half-an-hour, after which the half-and-half domino retakes her place in front. In fact, in that box, they do nothing but come in and go out, like the Chinese ghosts at the Théâtre de Séraphin."

"It is curious; indeed, very curious," said the captain, more serious than ever. "And you are also going to enter the box, I suppose, to find the solution of this enigma?"

"That is to say, that I am going to try to enter it. It isn't certain that I shall succeed. The lady takes great care of herself. But I have another plan. Simancas and Saint-Galmier just now occupied a box next to hers. They have just left. I saw them from a distance putting on their overcoats. I shouldn't have been willing to ask them for a place, because I can't endure them. Now that they have gone, I will tell the box-keeper that I am one of their friends. I will establish myself in the box they have deserted, and, once there, I am determined to know what to think about the doings of the party-coloured woman. And, to-morrow, I shall have a great deal to tell you about it. If I chose to send an article to the *Figaro* and sign it, I am sure that I should be talked about."

"My compliments, my dear fellow; my very sincere compliments. You are a born blood-hound. The partridge can't escape you. Good luck, then, and till to-morrow," said Nointel. And he went his way, adding in a low voice: "What an idiot!"

The expression was a severe one, but just, and Lolif might pass for a finished type of a Prussian gull: an idler, a chatterer, a doter on trifles, a seeker of ridiculous problems, and, still more, as vain as any four

men of his time. He gave himself up to amateur reporting, just as he might have collected shells or raised Dutch canaries, to have a specialty. And he had finished by becoming enamoured of the avocation he had chosen, although he had succeeded but little in it. His library was composed of judicial romances,—the works of that talented and lamented writer, Emile Gaboriau, for instance—and the memoirs of Canler and Vidocq. He knew the operations of these illustrious detectives by heart, and he dreamt of equalling even the great Lecoq himself, but so far he had not had the luck to discover the least murderer, or even a simple thief, and this injustice of fate made him melancholy at times. Nevertheless, he was not discouraged, and on that particular night he hunted a mystery with more ardour than ever.

As soon as he was rid of Nointel, he returned to the search, and speedily reached the game-cover. Before starting on the hunt he had counted all the boxes on the right, and, after repeating this operation in the corridor, he arrived, without the least trouble, at the conclusion that the one which was occupied by the unknown woman in the party-coloured domino, bore the number 27. He wished to try a master-stroke, and, designating the box with his finger, he said to the woman charged with the care of opening the boxes: "Open the door for me, please."

"Impossible, sir," replied the box-keeper. "That is forbidden me."

"By whom?"

"By the person who hired 27, and who occupies it. I have orders to admit none but ladies."

"And several have come, I know," said Lolif, pretending to look for his purse. "But the person is alone at this moment."

"I don't say no, but I have my orders—orders well paid for—and if I failed in them I should lose all."

"Bah! if I gave you two louis?"

"You might give me five, you wouldn't enter."

"I was sure of it," thought Lolif. "It is a great lady. None but a princess could have paid enough to render this Cerberus in petticoats incorruptible." And he continued aloud:

"Then, open me 29. We hired it for three, and the two friends who took it with me have just gone. I met them in the corridor—General Simancas and Dr. Saint-Galmier."

"Oh! I know those gentlemen. They are subscribers. And since monsieur has hired the box with them, he can enter," said the woman, delighted at the prospect of gaining a good fee without violating the orders of the lady in box 27.

Lolif, as much delighted as the woman, glided into No. 29, and saw, at the first glance, that there was no one in front of the next box. He knew very well that the black and white bird had not yet flown; the box-keeper had just told him so. No doubt, then, but what this black and white bird had taken refuge at the back of her cage. Lolif, to assure himself of this, gave a furtive look over the partition, and beyond the curtain of the little room behind the box he espied the end of a white dress. For the moment he asked for no more, and so he installed himself in a position not to lose sight of this silken train, immaculate like a dove's wing. He stood upright against the partition, pretending to be looking with his glasses on to the floor where quadrilles were being danced, and into the lower tier of boxes, which were already being vacated, for it was three o'clock. Nothing equals an opera-glass for hiding the real direction in

which one is looking. One can point it at the most distant horizon, and observe with ease what is taking place two paces off. The ingenious Lolif made use of this stratagem during six long minutes. Nothing stirred, however, in the next box. The dove did not coo, and its white plumage did not stir upon the carpet.

"It is strange," said the amateur detective to himself. "Can she have fallen asleep? No, I'm stupid. A woman doesn't sleep at an opera house ball, and besides the brass instruments of the orchestra make hubbub enough to waken the dead. And yet she doesn't stir. I think this is the time to reveal my presence." He leaned forward a little, in order to see the better, and coughed softly. "Nothing," he murmured; "not the least movement. Strange! strange. Upon my honour, it seems as though she had flown and left her domino there. Suppose I call her? Why not? She would then have to give some signs of life. If she goes out, I'll follow her into the corridor. If she comes to the front, I will find some explanation to give her. Dash it all! so much the worse. I'll risk it. Madame! No response. Can she be deaf? That's improbable. Madame!"

A quadrille had just finished. The orchestra had stopped playing. And Lolif had called sufficiently loud to be heard on the floor of the house below. "Nothing yet," he said; "it becomes alarming. She has perhaps fainted. Ah! going to her help would be a way of making her acquaintance. Yes, but that box-opener would refuse to open for me. Forward then with great measures! I shall get off with a fine, if an official report of the affair is drawn up."

Impelled by the desperate curiosity which was torturing his brain, Lolif thereupon sprang upon the edge of the box he occupied, climbed over the partition, and descended into his neighbour's. From below came some of those sayings which Rabelais calls *mots de gueule*, and his friends of the club who saw him execute this gymnastic performance from a distance laughed till they held their sides; but he troubled himself very little about those who were looking on. He quickly walked to the back of the box, raised the curtain, and saw the unknown woman lying on a divan in one of the corners of the room, her arms hanging by the side of her limp body, and her head resting upon her shoulder.

"I guessed it; she has fainted," exclaimed Lolif, taking her hands.

They were as cold as ice, but he felt a tepid liquid fall upon his own. Then he perceived that the white part of the woman's dress was covered with large dark stains.

"Blood!" he murmured, and at once he ran to the door and opened it, calling for help.

A flood of light inundated the box, and, from the corridor into which he had thrown himself in his distraction, Lolif saw a terrible sight. The woman in the black and white domino was dead—killed. The poniard which had pierced her neck had been left in the wound.

"Murder!" howled the box-opener, who was the first to come.

This sinister cry at once attracted the passers-by in the corridor; in the twinkling of an eye the box was crowded, and Lolif surrounded, seized, and maltreated, for he was taken for the murderer.

He did not try to defend himself, however, knowing full well that he would have no trouble in justifying himself, and he slyly thought: "At last, then, I shall be a witness! what affecting testimony I shall be able to give when the affair comes before the assizes!"

VI.

WHILE the bleeding body of the unfortunate Julia d'Orcival was being lifted from the divan on which it lay, Gaston Darcy was sleeping soundly in bed. He had abruptly left the ball to escape her, and had gone straight home, so that he awoke on the next day earlier than was his custom.

His uncle expected him at noon, and he was anxious not to miss the appointment. M. Roger had said to him: "We will talk about you, and perhaps about myself as well." This, no doubt, meant that Berthe Lestérel would be brought into question, and perhaps Madame Cambry also. At least, Gaston understood it so, having plainly noticed the advances made by the young widow to the magistrate, and having also observed that the magistrate had not remained indifferent to them. The thought of seeing his uncle marry did not distress him. Gaston was not one of those heirs who declare themselves robbed when a relative disposes of his wealth to suit himself; and, in fact, he had never reckoned on succeeding his father's brother. He had even often said that M. Roger Darcy would do right to found a family of his own, and, since a few days, he had said something else as well: that, in taking a wife at forty-five years of age, his uncle Roger would, by his example, authorise him (Gaston) to marry as he thought best. He said to himself, indeed, that to marry an *artiste* without a fortune was not more foolish than to marry a very young widow when a man is double her age. And he proposed to profit by the projected interview to discuss these delicate questions in all their breadth.

He rose, then, somewhat early, breakfasted rapidly, and had his brougham prepared to take him to the Rue Rougemont. The *Figaro* had not acquainted him with the catastrophe at the opera house, for the crime had been committed at three o'clock in the morning, and, well-informed as a newspaper may be, yet to publish certain news the latter must be brought to it before it goes to press. The news of the murder of Madame d'Orcival began to spread in Paris during the small hours of the morning, but it had not reached the quarter of the Champs Elysées, and Gaston's servants knew nothing about it. He went out, therefore, without having the least suspicion of what had occurred during the night, and on reaching the Rue Rougemont, he was somewhat surprised to learn from the lips of M. Roger Darcy's valet that his master was at the office he occupied as an examining magistrate, and that he begged M. Gaston to go and see him there.

The discreet servant said nothing more, and Gaston asked for no further information, but was conducted to the Palais de Justice. He had already been there several times to see his uncle, and he no longer lost himself in the passages of the complicated edifice in which justice performs its functions. At the office door he found an attendant, who took his card, and he was immediately admitted.

The magistrate was under arms, seated behind his desk covered with bundles of paper, and flanked by his clerk, who, on seeing Gaston, at once rose and discreetly went out of the room. M. Roger Darcy wore his magisterial air, an air which his nephew knew well enough, and which did not in the least resemble the air he donned in society or private life,

"Good morning, uncle," said Gaston; "I was at your house at the hour agreed upon, and I have now come here. You have, no doubt, been unexpectedly put in charge of a new affair. It seems to me that investigations are not usually conducted on Sundays."

"You know very well that it is always I who am designated in difficult and—serious cases."

"Then there is an affair which is serious and difficult? It has sprung up like a mushroom, then, for it wasn't in question when we separated at midnight on the Boulevard des Capucines."

M. Darcy rose up quickly, went towards Gaston, and looked into the whites of his eyes. Gaston commenced to laugh, and exclaimed: "Really, my dear uncle, you examine me as though I was under suspicion. Can it be that I have committed a crime unknown to me? What a pretty subject for a drama—'The magistrate's nephew; or, an assassin without knowing it.'"

This pleasantry did not cause any change in M. Roger's manner. "And so," he asked, "you have not heard of the event of the night?"

"Positively no. I left the ball a little before two o'clock; and at half-past two I was in my bed. I have seen no one this morning, and came here in my brougham."

"That is satisfactory. I like that best. You will be less embarrassed in answering me."

"Ah! I am to undergo an examination, then?"

"You see very well that you are not, since I have sent my clerk away. I have certain questions to ask you, that is all."

"Mademoiselle Lestérel or Madame Cambry is in question, eh? Both perhaps?"

"No. Madame d'Orcival is in question."

"Julia? I told you that I had ceased all connection with her. Do you think me capable of lying?"

"No. But you notified me of the rupture, officially, so to speak, without giving me any details. I want to know exactly what took place. On what day did you see this woman for the last time?"

"It was, let me see—I dined with you the next day, which was Tuesday—it was Monday."

"At what time?"

Gaston blushed and sought for a reply.

"Take care, I must have the truth," said the magistrate. "The situation is serious. You will see it yourself when I tell you why I insist."

Gaston thought that a new inquiry had been commenced concerning the suicide of Golymine the Pole, and he realised that it would be unworthy of him not to tell everything. "Very well," he commenced, "I will not conceal from you that on Monday evening I arrived at Julia's at nine o'clock, and that I left her about half-past eleven."

"Then you were there when that man Golymine came?"

"Yes. She left me for a moment to receive him. There was a violent altercation between them. She dismissed him, and returned to the room where I awaited her."

"You were playing a sad part there," said M. Darcy, severely.

"A part which accident had imposed upon me. I could not leave without finding myself face to face with that man. And I did not care to engage in a quarrel with a swindler. What would you have done in my place?"

"No improper suppositions, pray. When you left, this Golymine had already committed suicide. You did not know it?"

"Not the least in the world. He hanged himself in a room which I did not have to pass through to get out. I left the house without meeting any one."

"How does it happen that having been questioned by the commissary of police directly after the event, Madame d'Orcival said not a word of your visit?"

"She had every interest in not compromising me. I had just informed her that our relations must cease, but she, no doubt, hoped to bring me back after a few days of pique. And she eagerly seized hold of an opportunity for returning to favour by a good action."

"That is an explanation, but——"

"It is so true that I received a letter the next morning from her, a letter which is a masterpiece of its kind, and in which she notified me that she had not spoken of me, and begged me to remain silent also, so that she should not be accused of making an imperfect statement. If I did not tell you all when I went to see you on Tuesday, it was because I did not wish to get Julia into trouble."

"You have preserved this letter of hers?"

"Certainly; I have it at home."

The magistrate gave a sigh of relief and said: "That is very fortunate. You will give it to me."

"Well," thought Gaston, "something has really happened since yesterday."

"Let us proceed," continued M. Darcy. "Did you reply to Madame d'Orcival?"

"No. When a man wishes to have done with any one he must never reply. Replies are stepping-stones on which women, sooner or later, build up a reconciliation."

"And you have not seen Madame d'Orcival since? You have had no communication of any kind with her?"

"None. She realised that I had resolved not to renew our relations, and, as she is very proud, she abstained from all further steps. Only I think she has against me one of those grudges——"

"You fear she might injure you?"

"Yes; she is exceedingly intelligent. She has a connection with all classes of society, and she no doubt execrates me now. Julia is a charming woman, but a dangerous enemy."

M. Darcy listened with extreme attention, and his face brightened when he heard his nephew answer him so frankly.

"You did not meet her last night at the opera house ball," he asked, after a short pause.

"No, but I saw her at a distance without knowing that it was she."

"How was that?"

"I went for a moment into the club-box. Lolif was there, and showed me on the other side of the house a woman in a black and white domino——"

"Who is this Monsieur Lolif?"

"A man who has a mania for seeing mysteries everywhere, and who meddles with them in competition with the detectives. He believes he has a special aptitude for the calling. And last night he wearied me with his stupid hypothesis as to the conduct of this party-coloured domino."

He bored me so much that I left him there, and in the corridors I met my friend Nointel, who informed me that the domino in question was worn by no other than Julia d'Orcival. Nointel had surprised her just as she was looking at herself in a glass. She arrived at the ball——"

"At what time?"

"Oh, very early. Nointel will tell you exactly."

"Where does he live?"

"No. 125 Rue d'Anjou. Do you wish to summon him as a witness? Witness of what?"

"Continue your narrative," said M. Darcy, after having made a note.

"My narrative is finished. I didn't care to meet Julia, and, when I learned that she was at the ball, I scampered off like a hare."

M. Roger Darcy nodded his head with a satisfied air, took his place again in his chair, and commenced to write some names on blank printed forms.

"Now that I have replied to everything," said Gaston, gaily, "may I be allowed to ask you——"

"Have you still the intention of entering the office of the public prosecutor?" interrupted the magistrate.

"No doubt. Shall you oppose it?"

"It is not I who will oppose it. But how is it that you have not yet understood that your presence at Madame d'Orcival's, while Golymine was killing himself there, would become known?"

"You think yourself, then, obliged to inform the public prosecutor of what I have just confessed to you?"

"I shouldn't have thought myself obliged to do so yesterday, but to-day it is quite different. I am an examining magistrate, and it is my duty to ascertain all the facts which are connected, even indirectly, with the affair I investigate. And so I have to inquire into Madame d'Orcival's antecedents and surroundings; into her relations, past and present, with the most minute details. Nothing is insignificant in a case as obscure as this one, for the light may suddenly flash from a direction in which it is the least expected. Moreover, your name will figure in the case. You will be called as a witness. This is what bad ways lead to. I was anxious to have you confess in the first place, so that I might know how far you were compromised. I am now determined. There is quite enough to close the magisterial profession to you. I shall not reproach you. Only, I ask myself if I ought not to send in my resignation, since you bear my name, unfortunately."

"But, uncle," exclaimed Gaston, much moved, "what is going on, then? what investigation is in question?"

"You are about to know," said M. Darcy, displacing a pile of papers.

Gaston drew near to the desk quickly, and exclaimed: "How comes it that this object is in your office?"

"This poniard?"

"Yes, with its sheath in the form of a closed fan. There is, perhaps, not another in Paris like it."

M. Roger Darcy rose as though he had been bitten by a serpent, and said, in an agitated voice: "You know to whom it belongs."

*The reader may be here informed that this story, like most of those proceeding from the pen of M. du Boisgobey, is founded upon positive fact. In the present case the narrative is based in a measure upon the circumstances of the murder of Maria Fellerath, in Paris, some years ago—a crime which was never unravelled by the police, and which was perpetrated by means of a dagger, similar to the one described above.—*Trans.*

"Perfectly. I saw it and touched it last night. It was in the hands of a person whom you know."

"Name her!"

"In the hands of Mademoiselle Lestérel."

"You say that this poniard belongs to Mademoiselle Lestérel?" exclaimed M. Darcy.

"I say it because I am sure of it," replied Gaston, greatly surprised to see his uncle show so much emotion in regard to so seemingly insignificant a fact. "Mademoiselle Lestérel had brought this curious specimen of Japanese art to Madame Cambry's. I am even astonished that you did not notice it. You no doubt took it for a real fan. When the blade is in the sheath, one can easily be deceived about it. But I examined it closely, and I should recognise it among a thousand. I remember also having asked Mademoiselle Lestérel from whom she had received it."

"And she told you?"

"Yes; her brother-in-law gave it to her. This brother-in-law commands a merchant vessel, and he returned quite recently from a long cruise in the vicinity of Japan. He bought this gewgaw at Yeddo."

"His name? his address?" asked the judge bluntly.

"His name is Crozon, and he lives in the Rue Caumartin—but, really, uncle, I don't at all understand your emotion, for you are moved, I see it plainly—and I, I no longer know where I am—at each word I say, it seems to me that a brick-bat is falling on my head. I even ask myself if I am not getting blind, and if I don't confound Mademoiselle Lestérel's fan with this strange knife which appears to me to be an article tending to the conviction of some culprit. Will you allow me to examine it closer?" He took it, without M. Darcy opposing him, and as soon as he had it in hands: "It is certainly the same," he said. "Here is the little silken cord which attaches it to the wrist. Only yesterday, the blade appeared to me quite new; and now, one would think it was rusty."

"It isn't rust—it is blood," said M. Darcy, looking fixedly at his nephew.

"Blood!"

"Yes, the blood of Julia d'Orcival, who was murdered last night at the opera house ball."

"Oh, my God, but this is fearful!" exclaimed Gaston, throwing the poniard on the desk.

"Do you understand now why I questioned you?" asked his uncle.

"Do you understand why your career is ruined? This unfortunate woman was your mistress—you published your relations with her during a year—and you were still her lover not a week since."

"No; no doubt, I can no longer think of the magistracy—I shall console myself for that misfortune; but the death of this poor Julia——"

"Try to recover your self-possession, and to listen to me attentively. It is necessary that you should know all that I know. You might, perhaps, enlighten justice afterwards. Late last night, this Lolif, whom you had left in the club's box, and who later on had established himself in another box contiguous to that occupied by Madame d'Orcival, this Lolif, I say, seeing that the domino whom he watched out of curiosity remained behind the curtain at the back of her box, climbed over the partition and found his neighbour extended dead on the divan in the little room in the rear. He called the box-opener, people poured in; but the commissary of police on duty soon arrived, and the first steps in the proceedings were

sufficiently well carried out. Madame d'Orcival, it was shown, had been killed with a single blow of this poniard—a blow given with a firm hand, above the left clavicle, but downwards. The blade severed a large artery, and death must have been instantaneous. The weapon remained in the wound; the sheath being found on the floor of the box."

"At the ball at the opera house! It is unheard of! Who can have committed this horrible murder?"

"That is what I shall soon know, I hope. I hesitated a moment ago about taking charge of the investigation. Now, however, I am determined not to divest myself of it; whatever the situation in which I may be placed by certain circumstances connected with the affair, I will expose my reasons to the public prosecutor. I will go, if necessary, to the Keeper of the Seals, and I don't doubt but that they will give me their approval. However, you ask me who committed this abominable crime. Very well, it was a woman."

"A woman! How do you know it?"

"Madame d'Orcival entered box 27, at half-past twelve, or rather a little before. She did not leave it again, and at three o'clock she was found there dead. Now, she received in this box but one woman in a black domino, a woman who entered and went out four times, and who evidently killed Madame d'Orcival on the occasion of her last visit. The box-opener and Lolif were heard by the commissary of police, and their statements agree on this point. Now the box-opener did not leave her post, and Monsieur Lolif had not ceased to watch box 27 with his glasses, up to the moment when he entered it after having for an instant occupied box 29."

"That is true—I remained beside Lolif until about one o'clock, and like him I saw a black domino enter Julia's box. I also remember that Lolif said that this domino could not be worn by a fashionable lady, at least judging by the style in which the woman was masked."

"Monsieur Lolif said the same thing to the commissary. The box-opener was less precise. I interrogated them myself to-day, both of them, but I have not finished questioning you. Take a seat. I have an order to give."

Gaston complied, and lost himself in some very gloomy reflections, while his uncle wrote two notes which he gave to an attendant, summoned by touching a bell.

"Now," continued M. Darcy, as soon as the attendant had gone, "tell me about Mademoiselle Lestérel. You said to me, I recollect very well that she lived in the Rue de Ponthieu at the corner of the Rue de Berri."

This interpellation made Berthe's lover bound from his seat. "I hope you don't suspect her," he stammered.

"I don't suspect, I am seeking for information," replied M. Darcy. "What has been your intercourse with this young girl?"

"My intercourse! but you know it."

"I know that you often see her at Madame Cambry's, and in other drawing rooms. But I wish to know if you have never seen her elsewhere."

"I have no reason to hide from you that I made two attempts to be received at Mademoiselle Lestérel's. I scarcely knew her then, and I did not think she was unapproachable. I was deceived, however, she refused to receive me."

"I don't in the least doubt what you tell me, for I esteem you

sufficiently to believe that you would not have dreamed of marrying her if her conduct had been frivolous. Besides, Madame Cambry has a very favourable opinion of her. And so you affirm to me that you have never met her except in society?"

Gaston's first impulse was to tell his uncle about the nocturnal adventure which had once led to his accompanying Berthe home. But he reflected promptly that if he commenced to confess he would have to go on to the end. M. Darcy would not fail to ask him why the young girl walked the streets at night, and the explanation would necessarily end with the scene which had occurred at Madame Crozon's. Now, although Gaston did not yet admit that Mademoiselle Lestérel could be seriously accused of murder, he confusedly realised that a danger threatened her, and he cursed the thoughtlessness he had been guilty of in telling the examining magistrate that the Japanese poniard belonged to Berthe. How could that poniard have been used by the murderer? It was incomprehensible, but it was also impossible to believe that Berthe had assassinated Julia d'Orcival. And, nevertheless, Gaston dimly divined that, by his act—he who adored Berthe—she would find herself mixed up, at least indirectly, in a criminal affair. He thought, therefore, of repairing his fault, and he answered with a certain amount of assurance: "I never saw Mademoiselle Lestérel except at the houses where she sings. I never spoke to her except at Madame Cambry's."

One lie leads to another, and Gaston could no longer stop himself on the road into which fate had thrown him.

"Then," continued M. Darcy, "you will allow me to say to you that you decide very hastily about marrying a person whom you scarcely know. It would be excusable if you had just left college. At your age, and with your experience, it is absurd—or rather, it would seem inadmissible—for an examining magistrate. But I have seen you do so many foolish things, that I am obliged to believe you. I will pass, then, to another order of questions. Do you remember exactly at what hour we took leave of Madame Cambry?"

"At a quarter to twelve, within a few minutes. It was twelve o'clock when you set me down on the boulevard, and your bay goes like a deer."

"Mademoiselle Lestérel left the house before us."

"A very short time before us."

"And if my memory serves me right, Madame Cambry informed us that Mademoiselle Lestérel had been sent for, on the part of Madame Crozon, her sister, who was seriously indisposed?"

"Yes."

"And who lives in the Rue Caumartin, didn't you tell me?"

"Number 112 Rue Caumartin."

"Very near the opera house, consequently."

"What! you would suppose——"

"I suppose nothing. I am seeking for information."

"But Mademoiselle Lestérel never went to the ball at the opera house in her life. I would swear to it. And I will bet that she did not even know there was one there yesterday. However, it will be easy for you to ask Madame Crozon at what time her sister arrived at her house——"

"And at what hour she left it. Don't be uneasy, that will be done."

"I ought to warn you," said Gaston, quickly, "that Madame Crozon is in a state of health which requires a little caution; that her husband is, moreover, exceedingly jealous, and violent,"

"It is Mademoiselle Lestérel who told you that?"

"Yes; she loves her sister very much, she pities her, and——"

"And she confides her sorrows to Monsieur Gaston Darcy, who is paying her attentions. Nothing is more natural. But don't be too much alarmed. It will probably suffice for me to question the maid who came for Mademoiselle Berthe at Madame Cambry's. And if I am obliged to have a statement from Madame Crozon, I will proceed in a way not to trouble the peace of her household. However, this husband who is so fierce seems to me to be on pretty good terms with his sister-in-law, since he brings her back from his voyages some curiosities which are certainly singular."

"But, uncle, are you going to open an investigation in regard to this poniard?"

"Yes, of course I am, and without losing a minute."

"What! you can think that Mademoiselle Lestérel—that a young girl, virtuous even to unsociableness, gentle even to timidity——"

"Killed a woman whom she did not know, whom perhaps she never saw. No, I don't think so. But I should be wanting in my duty if I did not question this young girl, if I did not ask her how this Japanese knife in the shape of a fan, which she had with her yesterday evening, at half-past eleven—it is yourself who have just declared it—how this knife, which could not be confounded with another, was found at three o'clock driven into Julia d'Orcival's neck."

"Mademoiselle Lestérel may have lost it."

"And a woman may have found it, and that woman ran quickly to the opera house to assassinate Julia d'Orcival. Nothing is impossible."

Gaston, who felt all the irony concealed in this conclusion, held down his head and remained silent.

"My dear boy," continued M. Darcy, "you have done right to give up the magistracy, and I don't think you would succeed at the bar, for you defend your clients too badly. There are arguments in Mademoiselle Lestérel's favour which are worth a hundred times more than your chance explanation of an inexplicable fact—inexplicable at present, but which Mademoiselle Lestérel will explain, I hope. Has she not on her side the purity of her life, her irreproachable conduct, and especially the complete absence of a prior acquaintance between herself and the victim?"

Here Gaston could not prevent himself from turning pale. He had just remembered that Berthe knew Julia from having been brought up at the same boarding-school with her.

"Moreover," continued the magistrate, "an *alibi* will be the easiest thing in the world to establish. I shall hear the woman who conducted Mademoiselle Lestérel to the Rue Caumartin, and the door-porter of the house where Mademoiselle Lestérel resides. In ten minutes I shall know if she went to her sister's, and at what hour she returned to the Rue de Ponthieu. There still remains the poniard, and on this capital point I can forejudge nothing before having questioned her, as she had this strange trinket in her hand yesterday evening."

"You are going to question her, then?"

"You cannot doubt it, for you have enough common sense to understand that I ought to take account of the important fact you have revealed to me, and also that I ought to furnish this young girl with the means of justifying herself as quickly as possible."

"And you will have her called to your office?"

"It is done. If Mademoiselle Lestérel was found at home, she will be here in a few moments."

"What! she has been arrested? Some officers are going to bring her like a culprit."

"Not at all. I have sent a commissary of police to her who will present himself on my behalf, and beg her very politely to come and see me on urgent business. She knows me well enough not to be alarmed at an interview with me. And I have no need, I think, to tell you that I shall receive her with all the consideration she deserves. It will, I certainly hope, be a conversation and nothing more."

An attendant entered at this moment and spoke to M. Darey in a low voice. The magistrate answered him aloud: "Let her wait until I ring, and call my clerk immediately." And when the attendant had gone out: "She is there," said M. Roger to Gaston. "You must do me the pleasure to go away by the private door. You mustn't meet her."

"Couldn't you allow me to be present at the conversation you are going to have with her?" asked Gaston, who did not at all appear disposed to leave the room. And as his uncle shrugged his shoulders, he continued warmly: "If an examination were in question I shouldn't insist, but you have just told me that everything would be limited to a chat. Mademoiselle Lestérel is very timid. She may lose her head and become embarrassed in her answers—whereas, if I was here——"

"You would prompt her. Isn't it so. Really you are losing your wits, for you forget that you are talking to an investigating magistrate. That investigating magistrate may be your uncle, but it does not follow that, to be agreeable to you, he is disposed to transgress the rules of criminal procedure."

"Criminal!" repeated Gaston, mechanically.

"I repeat to you that I believe in Mademoiselle Lestérel's innocence, *a priori*, that I shall be the most benevolent of judges for her, and that I shall esteem myself happy to be able, at this very first interview, to exclude her from the case. But I have no time to lose, and I beg of you to leave me."

"I am going. One word more—one only," stammered Gaston, as he retreated towards the door. "If Mademoiselle Lestérel, embarrassed, does not succeed in justifying herself completely—if new appearances accuse her—pardon me for asking you this—what shall you do?"

"My duty," said the magistrate, and he pushed his nephew outside.

Almost at the same time the clerk entered by another door and silently took his place. He was followed by another man, whom M. Darey looked at in a way that was equivalent to a question.

"Well, sir," said this person, "I asked for Mademoiselle Lestérel. The door-keeper answered me that she was at home, but was no doubt still in bed, as she came in at four o'clock in the morning."

"Take a note of that, Pilois," said M. Darey, addressing himself to his clerk.

"Of course, I went up all the same. It was Mademoiselle Lestérel who came to open the door, and she at first acted very coolly with me. When I told her that I came on the part of Monsieur Darey, her expression changed, but she did not let me enter without explanations. She at first thought that I was sent by Monsieur Gaston Darey, your nephew."

"And when she knew that you were sent by Monsieur Darey, the investigating magistrate, what was her manner then?"

"She seemed at first somewhat affected; but she soon recovered herself, and begged of me to wait while she went and put on her hat." She was already dressed when I arrived."

"She did not ask you why I had sent for her?"

"I think she had that question on her lips, but she did not address it to me."

"How is she lodged?"

"Very modestly, so far as I could see. The apartment is small, but kept with great care."

"And what did she say to you during the drive from the Rue de Ponthieu here?"

"She talked but little, but she expresses herself exceedingly well, and with much moderation. She did not say a word in reference to the forced visit she was going to make you. She merely asked me if your nephew was in your office when you had sent for her, and it seemed to me that she expected to meet him there."

"That is rather strange," said M. Darcy to himself. "Can this poor child have imagined that I sent for her in order to betroth her to Gaston, or object to the marriage." And he added, "You don't know what is in question, and it is as well that you should know. An accident has just informed me that the Japanese poniard belongs to Mademoiselle Lestérel. However, I know the antecedents of this young girl, whom I meet somewhat often in society, and it is hard for me to believe that she assassinated Julie Berthier. Now that I have acquainted you with this point, what is your opinion? Do you believe her guilty?"

The commissary hesitated for a moment, and then replied, "Well, sir, to say the truth, I dare not speak out. Nothing is more difficult than this kind of estimation, and everybody can be mistaken. I have seen rascals who have finished by being guillotined remain quite calm when I arrested them—as calm as though they had never had even the theft of a handkerchief on their conscience; whereas an innocent person may lose his head and run into explanations which are compromising. However, I admit that this young person does not impress me as having committed a murder, especially a murder as bold as that at the opera house."

"I don't believe it either, but that will have to be seen. You let her enter, as I recommended you, into the office of one of my colleagues, who is away?"

"Yes, sir, and I have left a guard at the door. The young lady has communicated with no one."

"Very well. Will you please conduct her by the private passage? It is important that she should not meet any of the witnesses whom I have summoned, and who have arrived, as I know."

The commissary bowed and went out. "Pilois," said M. Darcy to his clerk, "you will make a minute of the examination, as usual. But omit the polite forms with which I shall commence. Arrange matters so that the person who is coming here will not perceive that you are recording my questions and her answer. She must take you at first for a secretary or copyist. I will warn you when I consider it is no longer inconvenient for her to know who you are."

An investigating magistrate has to render an account to no one, and is completely independent; he can exercise his formidable functions as he understands them. Thus the law wills it, and the law is right. What

exact rule would be as good as the inspirations which a humane and enlightened magistrate draws from his conscience, and would it not be superlatively unjust to proceed in the same manner with regard to all prisoners? M. Darcy had a lively sense of this. It was repugnant to him to treat Mademoiselle Lestérel at the outset as though she was guilty; he hoped that she would justify herself at the very commencement of the conversation, and, in that case, he wished to spare her the annoyance of signing a statement which would remain with the official papers in the case.

"If things turn out as I hope, neither she nor Gaston will figure as a witness in the case." He said this to himself while walking about in his office, and he was very careful not to take his place in his official seat to receive Mademoiselle Lestérel, for he was very anxious not to intimidate her.

He went to meet her as soon as she entered, and kindly offered his hand to her. This reception reassured the young girl, who was pale and trembled slightly. The colour returned to her cheeks, and a smile came to her lips.

"Excuse me, mademoiselle," M. Darcy said to her—"excuse me for having imposed some trouble upon you in order to ask an explanation of you. I am retained in my office by a serious affair, and the explanation is urgent. Take my nephew Gaston to account for the journey I have caused you to make."

This beginning made Mademoiselle Lestérel blush.

"Really now," thought M. Darcy, who observed her attentively, "I believe I divined it. She flatters herself that I am going to talk to her of marriage. It would be cruel for me to leave her in this illusion."

Thereupon he took up the poniard-fan which he had laid on his desk, and, holding it out to the young girl, he said: "Gaston assures me that this belongs to you."

Berthe appeared troubled; her countenance changed, but she replied without any hesitation: "It is true, sir. This object is mine. I had it yesterday at Madame Cambry's, and I told Monsieur Gaston Darcy why I had it. My brother-in-law had just given it to me, and I was so happy——"

"That you went into society with a poniard at your waist, no more or less than a Spanish lady of romance," said M. Darcy gaily.

He was delighted with the frankness with which Mademoiselle Lestérel had recognised the Japanese weapon, and did not doubt in the least but what she was innocent. He even hoped that in replying to the question he was preparing to address to her, she would furnish him with a useful clue by which he might discover the culprit. "Then you lost it?" he asked, simply.

"Yes, sir," replied Berthe in a less positive tone; "and I am exceedingly happy to find it again."

"You lost it on leaving Madame Cambry's?"

"Probably—unless it was in the cab—I think it must have been in the cab—and I should have reclaimed it if I had not forgotten the number of the vehicle."

"Which took you to your sister's? You sent this cab away?"

"Yes, sir."

"Without perceiving that you had forgotten your fan in it."

"I did not perceive it until I returned home—very late—I did not leave my sister till three o'clock in the morning."

"That is precisely the time at which your fan was found. It would, no doubt, never have been known that it belonged to you if my nephew had not come to see me in my office, where he doesn't set foot three times a year. As for me, I had not noticed this murderous weapon in your pretty hands. You would never guess where it was found?"

"It wasn't the coachman who brought it you, then?"

"No, mademoiselle. Your poniard was found at the ball at the opera house—in a box—the box of the first tier, which bears the number 27."

While the magistrate talked thus, the young girl was visibly disturbed, and M. Darcy, who perceived it, suddenly assumed his judicial manner and exclaimed: "In the box in which Julia d'Orcival was murdered."

"Julie murdered! it isn't possible!" exclaimed Berthe. She had become livid; she shuddered, and she would certainly have fallen upon the floor if M. Darcy had not supported her.

He made her sit upon a chair, that reserved to prisoners, while he himself took his place in his own. There was nothing left in him now but the magistrate. "This news causes you a very deep impression, I see," he commenced, after making a sign to his clerk, who followed all his movements from the corner of his eyes.

"It upsets me," replied Berthe, with an effort.

"You were ignorant of it, then?"

"How should I have known it! I do not buy any newspapers, and I have not been out this morning."

"It is a terrible event, and I can understand that it would affect you, for you no doubt knew Madame d'Orcival, since you have just called her by her first name, Julie—her real name which she had Italianised."

"Yes—I knew Julie Berthier—formerly—we passed three years at the same boarding-school—at Saint-Mandé."

"Then your grief is quite natural. To learn so suddenly of the death of a friend—and what a death!"

"Madame d'Orcival was no longer my friend," rejoined Berthe quickly.

"I ceased seeing her very soon after she left the school. She travelled abroad, and since she has returned to live in Paris, she lived in a circle which I could not—would not frequent."

"I understand that, mademoiselle, and all I know of you agrees with what you tell me. Madame Cambry loves and esteems you. I cannot, then, believe that you have continued frequenting Madame d'Orcival, and I am quite disposed to admit that it was not you who forgot this knife in the box in which she was killed. You lost it. Somebody found it. That is understood. Will you, if you please, merely specify the facts which followed upon your departure from Madame Cambry's?"

Berthe held down her head, and did not reply.

"I will help your memory," continued Darcy. "Your sister's servant came for you at about half-past eleven. You went with her in a public cab which she had retained, and you were taken in all haste to the Rue Caumartin. Madame Crozon detained you till three o'clock. Her husband was no doubt with her."

"No, sir," said the young girl, with some hesitation.

"What! he had left his wife all alone in the state of health she was in?"

"The attack came on suddenly—my brother-in-law could not foresee it—he came home very late."

"Exceedingly late, in fact, if you did not see him. But you, at least,

saw the maid who accompanied you to the Rue Caumartin. Very well; her evidence will suffice. I have had her sent for, and we will hear her."

"She is here, then!" murmured Berthe, in an inaudible voice.

"Yes, mademoiselle, I am going to give the order for her to be shown in, and if, as I have no doubt——"

"No," said Mademoiselle Lestérel, in dismay, "no, it is useless, I will not see her."

"Mademoiselle," said M. Darcy, coldly, "it seems to me that you don't realise your position, or mine. A crime was committed during the past night. I am a magistrate, and I am charged with the investigation of the affair. Now, the knife with which Madame d'Orcival was killed belongs to you——"

"What! it was that knife?" murmured Berthe.

"It was left in the wound, and, if I drew it from the sheath which so well imitates a fan, you would see upon it the blood of Julie Berthier, your boarding school friend."

"How horrible!"

"Yes, it is horrible—so horrible that no one would ever have thought of accusing you. An unfortunate accident, a fatal coincidence has brought you into the case—temporarily, I hope. You must justify yourself, and I have it in my heart to furnish you with the means of doing so. The best of all is to prove that you were at your sister's at the time that Madame d'Orcival was struck in her box. Madame Crozon's servant can testify to your *alibi*. Why do you refuse to see her?"

Berthe Lestérel remained silent.

"Understand," continued M. Darcy, "that this person's testimony will be decisive. You fear, perhaps, that on meeting you in this office she will take you for an accused person. Reassure yourself. I can avoid your meeting her. You can, if you desire it, pass into the adjoining room, and the examination will take place in your absence."

"Why question her?" said Berthe in a husky voice. "She will tell you that she did not come last night to Madame Cambry's. Spare my sister, I beg of you, the sorrow of learning that I used her name for—a lie."

M. Darcy started. He had not expected this answer. "And so," he continued slowly, "you admit now that Madame Crozon sent no one for you last evening. Then the story of her sudden sickness was invented by you, and you did not set foot in the Rue Caumartin?"

Mademoiselle Lestérel kept silent, a silence which in itself was significant enough.

"Somebody, however, came and asked for you," continued the magistrate, "a woman who had the appearance of being a servant—a woman who knew that you were passing the evening in the Avenue d'Eylau, and who had serious news to inform you of, for she was greatly agitated; Madame Cambry told me so. Name this woman, then, so that I may summon her as a witness, if her testimony can justify you."

"I don't know her," stammered Berthe.

"You don't know her, and yet you followed her in the middle of the night. You oblige me to tell you that your system of defence is very unskilful, and that I shall quickly arrive at the truth. The cabman will be found, and it will be known where he took you. The person who was with you will also be found, and if by chance it was Madame d'Orcival's servant, she will tell the truth. She will state that her mistress sent her

for Mademoiselle Lestérel, who wished—why not?—who wished to see the ball at the opera house.”

It was a means of escape that M. Darcy, while talking thus, held out to the poor child who was being overwhelmed by her own reticence and untruths. Berthe, instead of seizing hold of it, however, shook her head sadly and murmured: “It was not Julie Berthier’s maid.”

“That is what I shall soon know, for I shall hear all Madame d’Orcival’s servants. I shall visit her residence, and take cognizance of all the papers found there. You never wrote to your old friend?”

“Never, sir,” articulated Berthe frankly.

M. Darcy felt that, on this point, she told the truth, and he at once passed to a question which she assuredly could not anticipate. “Have you heard of the suicide of Count Golymine?” he asked.

Mademoiselle Lestérel became pale, but she did not hesitate to reply: “Yes, sir, I read an account of it in a newspaper.”

“You did not know this Count Golymine?”

“No, sir. He was pointed out to me once in the Champs-Élysées. That is all.”

“Who pointed him out to you?”

“An Italian artiste, Monsieur Crisini, who has often sung with me at concerts.”

This was said so frankly that the magistrate no longer insisted. From the very commencement of the affair, he had had the idea that Julia’s murder might be connected with the suicide of her former lover, connected with it by a tie which remained to be discovered, and he promised himself to make researches in that direction. But he was now convinced that there had never been anything in common between Berthe Lestérel and the Polish Lovelace. He returned, therefore, to the system of direct attack, although he still doubted the young girl’s guilt. “Mademoiselle,” he commenced, “I have pointed out to you the danger to which you expose yourself by refusing to explain. The better to show you this danger, I will sum up the situation in a few words. You left Madame Cambry’s at half-past eleven. You left to follow a woman whom you state you don’t know. You did not go to your sister’s, and you did not return home in the Rue de Ponthieu until four o’clock in the morning. What did you do from half-past eleven until four o’clock? The whole affair is there.”

After a short pause he continued: “You persist in not answering. I will proceed then. How did the weapon with which the assassin murdered Madame d’Orcival pass from your hand to hers? If you told me that you lost it on the floor of the opera house, the explanation would be plausible, and I should place much reliance on it. It may be admitted that this weapon was picked up in a corridor, or in the dancing-hall, by the woman who made use of it—for it was a woman—she was seen entering the box and leaving it. But it is impossible to admit that the poniard forgotten by you in a cab or lost in the street was precisely the same one found by a woman who was going to the ball to kill Madame d’Orcival?”

“I recognise that it is improbable,” finally said Berthe, who had recovered her self-possession a little. “But I swear to you, sir, that I am not guilty. I defend myself badly, I know it—I find nothing to reply to you when you question me. But if I had committed this horrible crime, I should have thought that I might be accused of it. Do you believe,

then, that I should have chosen a weapon so easily recognised? Do you believe I should have carried this weapon to Madame Cambry's—that I should have shown it to Monsieur Gaston Darcy?"

"No, without doubt," said the magistrate, struck by this simple and just reasoning. "To any one but you I should object, however, that the murder may not have been premeditated; that it perhaps followed an unforeseen quarrel, and that, consequently, the fact of having shown the poniard is not an absolute proof of innocence. However, I prefer to repeat to you that you can furnish a much more natural explanation, an explanation which a very praiseworthy sentiment prevents you from giving. I have already told you that it can be very well conceived that you let this knife fall on the floor of the opera house. It is probably this that happened to you; and if you won't admit it, it is because you fear to injure your reputation, which, I am glad to acknowledge, is excellent. But, in truth, you are wrong. The opera house ball is not a school of morality, and you were not in your place there. But, from the fact of your having been there, no one will conclude that you left your honour there. Curiosity led you there, no doubt. It is very excusable. Many other women, and of the best society, too, have yielded to the same temptation. They have not boasted of it, but those who have been recognised there have not for that reason been put under the ban by the virtuous members of their sex."

While talking with animation, M. Darcy followed the effect of his words on Berthe's face, and he thought he could see that he had hit the mark. "It is a simple confidence which I ask of you," he continued, "a confidence which I shall not abuse, you may believe me. Tell me that you went to the ball. Tell me that you went there with a friend who sent her maid to beg of you to accompany her. And when you have told me that, when you shall have named that friend to me, I will manage to verify what you say, without your being compromised."

Mademoiselle Lestérel's face had brightened while the magistrate was excusing the imprudent woman who ventured to attend a masquerade ball; but it clouded again when he talked of controlling the confession he solicited. M. Darcy did not try to hide the sorrowful surprise which this attitude caused him. One could read upon his countenance that he began to think that the young girl had not a clear conscience, and that it was time to treat her like an ordinary prisoner under suspicion. And yet it seemed impossible to him still that this gentle, frail creature could have mortally struck Julia d'Orcival; that a murderous design had germinated under her pure brow; that her white and delicate hand had been stained with blood.

A new idea occurred to him, and he wished to make a last effort. "It seems I was mistaken," he said, slowly. "You persist in contending that you did not go to the opera house. You have admitted that you did not go to your sister's. Where, then, did you pass the hours which elapsed between your departure from the Avenue d'Eylau and your return to the Rue de Ponthieu? You realise that it is necessary that you should explain the employment of your time, and yet you furnish no explanation. There is one which I am obliged to accept, since you refuse to give me another. And, before I ask you if the one I have found is the true one, I ought to remind you, if you have forgotten it—or inform you of it, if you are ignorant of it—that a judge is a confessor, and that the most absolute discretion is the first of his professional duties. My clerk, who writes at the

end of this table, is bound by the same obligations as myself. You can talk, then, without fear. None will know what you confide to me, for my mission is limited to finding out by whom this crime was committed, and I have no right to remember the declarations of a witness, when those declarations have no bearing on the affair I am investigating. So, mademoiselle, if you told me—pardon me for mentioning it—if you told me that, from midnight till four o'clock, you remained with—a gentleman friend, I should assure myself of the fact, I should assure myself of it with all the prudence possible—and I should afterward forget it.”

The young girl started, and big tears rolled down her pale cheeks. “I understand you, sir,” she murmured. “You believe I have a lover. I needed but this humiliation.”

“God knows I do not wish to humiliate you,” said M. Darcy, very much affected. “I seek the truth, and it is not my fault if I am obliged to seek it where it isn’t—I see it now. You will not do me the injury to think that I should suspect you of having fallen, if this suspicion had not been, so to speak, imposed upon me by your obstinate silence.”

Mademoiselle Lestérel did not reply. She wept.

“Mademoiselle,” continued the worthy magistrate, “I do not wish to profit by the emotion which carries you away. Recover yourself. Reflect. Look the consequences of the attitude you have adopted against a benevolent judge seriously in the face. Perhaps you do not yet realise that I am forced to treat you as though you were guilty, since you will not utter the word which would prove your innocence. What holds you back? Do you fear compromising some one? Remember that, if I am reduced to having you arrested, I shall use all the resources at my disposal to discover what you are so anxious to hide from me. And I shall succeed in it, have no doubt upon the point. All will be brought into the broad light of day, and it will no longer depend on me to prevent the exposure which you fear. See! mademoiselle, I can very well tell it you. I dimly see that there is a mystery in this affair which you alone are able to clear up. I indistinctly realise that you are sacrificing yourself for another. Very well, you are following a wrong course. If, before you leave here, you consented to admit the truth to me, I might perhaps save the person for whom you sacrifice yourself so generously—I ought to say so foolishly. In a few moments it will be too late. The affair will follow its natural course, and justice will attain its object, without troubling itself about considerations which might affect me—a man—but which do not exist for the law.”

Berthe sobbed. On her troubled face one could read that a violent struggle was taking place in her mind, but she was still silent.

“And so,” continued M. Darcy, “you persist in not justifying yourself. And so I shall be obliged to inform Madame Cambry that Mademoiselle Lestérel, whom she called her friend, has been arrested on suspicion of murder.” He had reserved this adjuration till the end, and he thought for a moment that the young girl was going to yield to it.

Berthe held out her hands in a supplicating manner toward him, her mouth opened to speak, but the confession expired upon her lips. “No,” she murmured, “no—one murder is enough. I cannot. I cannot.” And she added in a scarcely audible voice: “Do what you will with me.”

M. Darcy made a gesture of sorrowful surprise, and, indicating a printed form, said to his clerk: “Fill in that order of arrest with the name of Mademoiselle Berthe Lestérel.”

VII.

GASTON had left M. Roger Darcy's office much against his will, and, in the trouble into which he had been thrown by the response of the magistrate, that he would do his duty, he had neglected asking him where and when he should see him again. He did not doubt Berthe Lestérel's innocence, but he longed to know that she had completely justified herself, and he was not in the humour to wait patiently until the next day to learn the result of the examination. So he determined not to go away, but to await his uncle at the gate which opens on the Boulevard du Palais.

The magistrate's brougham stood before this door, and Gaston, who had seen it there on his arrival, now found it there still and near his own. The two coachmen often met in the Rue Montaigne and Rue Rougemont, and they had not missed so fine an opportunity for a gossip. They had left their boxes and stood talking with a garde de Paris, who seemed to be relating an interesting story to them, for they listened very attentively.

Darcy readily divined that he was talking to them about the crime at the opera house. The news was already circulated through Paris, and it had certainly, at a very early hour, reached the Préfecture of Police, adjoining the Palais de Justice. This soldier was no doubt well informed; all the more so since he must have seen the examining magistrate, the clerk, commissaries, and detectives pass by—in fact, all the officials who are set in motion by a murder.

Darcy's apparition put an end to the colloquy. The coachmen hastened to resume their seats, and to take the classic positions familiar to the Jehus of well-conducted establishments: the reins gathered up in the left hand, the whip held in the right one, and the driver's eyes fixed on the horse's head. The soldier also took his position on guard at the entrance to the vaulted passage which leads to the yard of the Sainte-Chapelle. So Gaston had full liberty to walk up and down on the sidewalk, and to abandon himself to the reflections which crowded upon his mind. These reflections were not gay ones, as may well be believed. He reproached himself bitterly for having, by his thoughtlessness, thrown Mademoiselle Lestérel into so deplorable an adventure, and he commenced to perceive that this adventure might finish badly. He no longer hid from himself the gravity of the circumstances which accused Berthe, and he knew that his uncle would not hesitate to have her arrested if he believed her guilty. And, as he had a lively imagination, he pictured the consequences of an arrest. He saw the assize court. He heard the agitated voice of the foreman of the jury reading the verdict. All the legends in regard to innocent persons being condemned came back to his memory. He thought of Lesurques. And he said to himself that a judicial error might send the woman he loved to the scaffold.

For he loved her more ardently than ever—this young girl who, at this moment, was being questioned like a criminal. The strange fatality of which she was the victim excited Darcy's love, and, indeed, he would have believed himself the most cowardly of men if he had abandoned Berthe Lestérel in her misfortune. However, he did not despair. He flattered himself that, after a short explanation, the magistrate, better informed, would send the poor child away with some kind words, and he fully intended to approach her when she left this formidable edifice in which

consciences are probed—approach her to tell her all that was in his heart, to ask her pardon for having compromised her, and to swear to her that his sentiments had not changed. He calculated that the trial would scarcely last an hour, that he should soon see Berthe appear, and, then, a few moments afterwards M. Roger Darcy, whom he essentially wished to interview as soon as possible. He decided not to leave the place before he had successively met the justified prisoner, and the magistrate cured of his suspicions.

It was cold. The wind blew from the north, and standing in the open air was not at all agreeable. But lovers care little for the inclemency of winter. Gaston began bravely beating the asphalt with the soles of his boots, without losing sight of the passage he was watching. The presence of the two coachmen annoyed him more than the north wind, for he felt certain that they were asking themselves why he was stamping up and down there, instead of getting into his carriage. He would willingly have sent his own one away, but he could not take it upon himself to dismiss his uncle's, and so he resigned himself to submit to this domestic espionage. The garde de Paris also embarrassed him. This vigilant soldier did not lose sight of him, and was no doubt astonished at a well-attired civilian remaining on guard before the door of the Palais, instead of going to warm himself in a café. Gaston thought of telling him that he was the nephew of M. Darcy, the examining magistrate, when suddenly a cab stopped before the door.

From this cab there alighted a man who had the look of a detective, and then a woman whose face was not unknown to Gaston. He tried to recall where he had already seen her, and ended by remembering that, on the day he visited the residence of Berthe's sister, he had seen this woman watching over the vehicle which contained the husband's baggage. "Good!" he thought, "it is Madame Crozon's servant, the one who came last evening to Madame Cambry's in search of Mademoiselle Lestérel. My uncle has sent for her to receive her testimony, and this woman will declare that she took Mademoiselle Lestérel to the Rue Caumartin. It needs no more to establish that Mademoiselle Lestérel did not go to the opera house. I am at ease now. The affair will be followed by no unpleasant consequences; and within ten minutes the examination will be over, Berthe will be free."

"Why, halloo! Darcy," said some one behind him at this moment, "What the deuce are you doing here?"

Gaston wheeled round, and found himself face to face with Lolif. The amateur reporter was radiant. His silly face had assumed quite a novel expression, an air of importance and self-satisfaction.

"What! are you here for yourself?" asked Darcy, who was disagreeably surprised by this meeting.

"What! you don't know? Ah! in fact, you left the opera last night before the finish. But your uncle is charged with the investigation of the affair. He has no doubt told you that Julia d'Orcival was assassinated in her box, and that——"

"And that you declared you could throw some light on this strange affair. Yes, he has told me that. But, I suppose, that you are no better informed than myself. I was with you in the club box, and, like you, I saw a woman in a domino enter the box occupied by poor Julia."

"Oh, you, my dear fellow, you are not observant. You did not remark the figure and bearing of this woman in a domino, who certainly

struck the blow, but I noted the slightest details of her costume. You did not take away the body."

"That is an advantage which I don't envy you," said Gaston, impatiently. "Upon the whole, what do you know?"

"A great many things. But you will excuse me for not confiding them to you. I am a witness; and you, the nephew of a magistrate, are not ignorant of the fact that a witness has sacred duties. The first of all is absolute discretion. I can tell nothing to anybody before having testified before the examining magistrate who has done me the honour to summon me."

"Excuse me," answered Darcy, ironically, "I had forgotten that you were acting in a sacerdotal capacity. You remind me of it. I will be very careful not to insist, and even not to retain you. Go and enlighten justice—and above all things try not to mislead it."

"What do you take me for? Don't you know that I am gifted with an infallible eye? Leave it to me to see that the abominable female who killed Madame d'Orceival is condemned. Julia will be avenged, thanks to your friend Lolif. I have already gathered together a mass of proofs. I shall compare, weigh, group them, and when I have formed them into a sheaf, you will see the light flash from them."

"The light of a sheaf! that's very fine."

"Laugh! You won't mock at me when your uncle tells you that I have given the true clue to him."

"Go and see him then as fast as you can."

"I am going. Good-bye, my dear fellow. If you come to the club this evening, I shall, perhaps, be able to tell you more."

With this promise, which made Darcy shrug his shoulders, Lolif turned on his heels and entered the yard with the majesty of a man who brings the solution of a problem. Madame Crozon's servant, and the detective who accompanied her, had preceded him there. Gaston found himself again alone on the side-walk, between the coachmen, still at shoulder-arms, and the garde de Paris, who continued pacing his beat.

Lolif's ridiculous words had somewhat troubled Gaston, and he said to himself: "It is to be hoped that this fool won't go and confuse matters with the absurd romances he draws from his brain. He knows literally nothing, but he is capable of inventing anything. I don't understand why he should have been summoned. Fortunately, he doesn't know Mademoiselle Lestérel. If he knew her, or if he only suspected that fate had mixed her up in the affair, his disordered head would conceive something extravagant. But he suspects nothing. He will not even see Berthe, for my uncle has taken his precautions so that no one shall meet her in the corridors. And then, I have warned my uncle that Lolif is a visionary, and that his assertions are without value."

In reasoning thus, Gaston tried to reassure himself, and only succeeded in half doing so. Time passed, and still Berthe Lestérel did not appear. The examination was prolonged then, and for it to be prolonged it was apparent that M. Roger Darcy had not considered the young girl's first replies sufficient.

"Before he sends her away he is waiting for the confrontation with this servant to terminate," thought Gaston, feeling happy at having explained to himself a delay which cruelly worried him.

But a quarter-of-an-hour elapsed, then half-an-hour, and no one left the Palais de Justice. On the other hand, people who, to judge by their

appearance, were no doubt witnesses, had entered it; among others, a fat woman whom Darcy thought he remembered having seen opening the boxes at the opera house. Evidently the affair was becoming complicated, and the confrontation with Madame Crozon's servant was not the only one to which Mademoiselle Lestérel was to be submitted. It was a bad augury, and Darcy could not conceal from himself that he had hoped too quickly.

However, a new incident suddenly came to drive away the gloomy presentiments which began to besiege him. From a fresh cab there alighted a detective and a woman who was elegantly dressed, and who, on perceiving him, ran towards him. It was Mariette, Madame d'Orcival's waiting-maid—Mariette in deep mourning and greatly moved.

"Ah, sir, what a misfortune!" she exclaimed; "my poor mistress—to die so young! It is terrible!"

"You have come to give evidence?" asked Darcy.

"Yes, sir, and I am going to tell everything, and my dear mistress will be avenged."

"You will tell all!" repeated Gaston. "How! do you——"

"Yes, I know the wretch who killed madame. I am going to denounce her to the judge. The proofs will be found; I will furnish them, and I hope she will be guillotined.* If she were pardoned, she should die by my hand."

"Her name! Tell me her name!"

Mariette opened her mouth to reply, but the detective who had remained behind to pay for the cab, came up, threw himself between them, and cut short the dialogue. "That's enough chatting," he said, roughly. "I have orders to take you before the examining magistrate, and this is not his office. Do me the pleasure to remain silent and walk on. You are awaited above."

The maid did not dare to breathe another word, but docilely followed her guardian. She had been brought up in the fear of the police, and was not at all anxious to have a quarrel with justice.

Darcy, feeling that he was not in a position to interfere, contented himself with calling out to her; "I shall be at home until noon to-morrow."

He saw her disappear under the arch, and again began to hope that his anguish was nearing its end. Julia's waiting-maid knew the culprit. She was going to designate her, and Berthe's innocence would be proclaimed. "My uncle was well inspired in sending for Mariette," he thought. "And he is too humane to delay Mademoiselle Lestérel's discharge for a moment. I shall see her, and tell her all I have suffered during the examination. She will come out in a quarter of an hour, for Mariette has only to speak to destroy this stupid accusation."

Darcy was not greatly mistaken in his estimation. At the end of twenty minutes, a cab came from the end of the yard—with the horse advancing at a walk, and he at once thought that this cab might contain the young girl. He placed himself near the entrance, and when the vehicle passed before him, he recognised Berthe sitting on the back seat. At the same time he saw that she was not alone. A man wearing a cap with some silver lace upon it sat beside her, and opposite this man sat the individual who had just now escorted Julia's maid.

The sight was a blow to Darcy's heart. "Arrested," he murmured; "she is arrested! unless——"

Meanwhile the cab turned into the Boulevard du Palais, and went towards the Pont au Change.

Darcy ran to his brougham and sprang into it, saying to the coachman: "Follow that vehicle."

He still hoped. Lovers always hope even against hope. "No," he thought; "no, it is impossible—they are not conducting her to prison—they are taking her to her home in the Rue de Ponthieu; the cab will turn to the left when it reaches the end of the bridge. If, on the contrary, Mademoiselle Lestérel has been arrested, the cab will turn to the right—that is the way to Mazas—and prisoners under suspicion are sent to Mazas."

However, the cab turned neither to one side nor the other. It crossed the Place du Châtelet and proceeded along the Boulevard de Sébastopol. "Good," thought Darcy, "now I am reassured. A search of her premises is no doubt in question—for she lives near the Champs Elysées. But where is this commissary taking her? For it is a commissary who accompanies her—he has also a subaltern with him. Then his disquietude returned to him. "Ah, I have it," he murmured after a moment's reflection. "She is going to the Rue Caumartin—by the boulevards—and I can explain to myself why she is going there. My uncle is a conscientious magistrate—even fastidious. He isn't satisfied with the testimony given by the servants; he wants to corroborate it by the testimony of the sister. It is quite natural after all; I did what he is doing last Tuesday. I carried mistrust so far as to go up to Madame Crozon's rooms to know if Mademoiselle Lestérel had told me the truth. And as this sister cannot be moved since she is ill, my uncle is sending a commissary of police to question her. He has understood that Berthe ought not to be treated like an ordinary prisoner under suspicion, and that it would be cruel to delay her discharge. In a quarter of an hour all will be over."

The cab was rumbling along all the time about ten yards ahead of the brougham, and Gaston did not lose sight of it.

"It is to be hoped that the furious husband won't be present at this explanation," he said, talking to himself. "His suspicions in regard to his wife would revive. He would burst out and spoil everything with his violence. Without taking into account that he would henceforth no longer believe in his sister-in-law's oaths. But I can do nothing there. My intervention would indeed do more harm than good."

Gaston began to feel reassured again, but one objection came to his mind and threw him into great perplexity. "How is it," he asked himself, "how is it that Mariette's declaration did not suffice to demonstrate Mademoiselle Lestérel's innocence? Mariette told me just now that she knew the woman who killed Julia. My uncle hasn't questioned Mariette, then? No; in fact, he hadn't had time to question her before Berthe's departure. When Mariette entered his office Berthe was no longer there. He had just sent her to the Rue Caumartin. There are several staircases; Berthe descended by one, while Mariette ascended by another. If my uncle had waited a few moments longer he would certainly have spared Mademoiselle Lestérel this unpleasant journey. But all is well that ends well. She hasn't long to suffer."

These arguments, propounded somewhat at hazard, kept him joyful until the cab reached the end of the Boulevard de Sébastopol. He had even then the satisfaction of seeing that the driver turned to the left, as though going to the Rue Caumartin; but this satisfaction was of short

duration. The cabman turned again, this time to the right, and the vehicle started up the Faubourg Saint-Denis. One would have thought that the commissary charged with escorting Berthe knew that Gaston was following her, and that the functionary took a malicious pleasure in upsetting all the poor lover's suppositions one after another. Where were they taking Mademoiselle Lestérel? Darcy had no longer any idea. The faubourg extended to the fortifications of Paris. However, poor Gaston said to himself that they were, at least, not taking her to prison, for the idea that all prisoners were lodged at Mazas had taken root in his mind, and he did not give it up.

On the other hand, he remembered all at once that the detective he had perceived in the cab was precisely the one who had brought Mariette. He had perfectly recognised that officer's face. So he was obliged then to renounce the idea that his uncle had submitted Berthe to the commissary's care before he had questioned the waiting-maid. The last hope he had cherished took flight.

Meanwhile the cab still moved on at the jog-trot of the two nags which drew it. Gaston pictured to himself Mademoiselle Lestérel reclining on the dusty cushions of that prison on wheels, humiliated, and obliged, perhaps, to answer insidious questions; and he angrily asked himself how M. Roger Darcy could have thus delivered over to police officials a young girl whose irreproachable past life ought to have preserved her from such an outrage.

"I will never be a magistrate," said Gaston, between his teeth. "The practice of its functions hardens the heart. And in time the most enlightened judges take all persons under suspicion for culprits."

While he was thus giving vent to his indignation, he noticed that the cab was going at a walk, and that it obliqued to the left. They had reached the hilly part of the Faubourg Saint Denis, just before it intersects the Boulevard Magenta.

"Is he going to stop?" asked Darcy of himself. "Yes—he turns more and more—he drives up to the sidewalk—what information can the commissary be seeking in this neighbourhood? And what is that old house with a huge gateway?"

The cab stopped, in fact, before a monumental gateway, and Darcy saw first the detective alight, then the commissary, and then Berthe, who hid her face in a handkerchief saturated with tears.

Faithful to his orders, the coachman of the brougham had held in his horse as soon as he had perceived that the vehicle he had been told to follow slackened its speed. When it drew up against the sidewalk, he took a position behind it, not too distant and yet not too close.

Darcy's first impulse was to spring to the ground and run to Mademoiselle Lestérel, but he quickly realised the possible consequences of such a feat. By what authority could he interfere with the affairs of justice? The fact that he was the nephew of an examining magistrate did not assuredly confer upon him the right of questioning judicial agents and hindering their operations. He restrained himself, therefore, and remained in his carriage disturbed, but looking with all his eyes.

The subaltern officer had a small door beside the larger one opened for him. Berthe passed through the doorway, followed by the commissary, and the door closed quietly. It was so quickly done that the passers-by paid no attention to it. But Darcy finally understood the truth. On the front of this gloomy edifice he saw the words "House of Detention"

inscribed, and his memory suddenly returned to him. "Saint-Lazare!" he murmured. "She is thrown into Saint-Lazare!"

How could he, he who knew Paris on the tips of his fingers, how could he have forgotten that the prison reserved for women is situated midway up the Faubourg Saint-Denis? How had he deceived himself to the point of imagining that this trip in the cab would not finish with an incarceration? He was too much agitated to question himself, and he no longer thought of questioning others. What would he have learned from the detective who had remained upon the sidewalk while the commissary was having Mademoiselle Lestérel's name duly registered on the records of the prison? The terrible inscription told enough. Berthe had just crossed the threshold of the infamous house in which the impure are incarcerated. M. Roger Darcy alone could tell why he had thrown this angel into this Parisian hell.

Gaston at first thought of being taken back to the Palais de Justice. His uncle was no doubt still there. But he feared that he would not be received. The intractable magistrate had probably given orders not to admit him during this first audience. It was better therefore to go to his residence and wait for his return. "Rue Rougemont," said the young man to his coachman, who had only to slacken the rein for the chesnut horse, which he held with difficulty, to start off again at full speed.

The journey, which was short, was accomplished in a few minutes, and the brougham drew up in front of the gate of M. Roger Darcy's residence. Gaston, on alighting from the carriage, espied his uncle's valet talking at the door of another brougham. A woman's hand, a hand elegantly gloved, had just extended a visiting card to the servant.

Under all other circumstances, Gaston would have kept discreetly on one side. But he was too much agitated to weigh his movements, and was anxious to know if his uncle had returned. He advanced therefore for the purpose of making inquiries of the servant, and was somewhat surprised to see that the visitor in the other carriage was Madame Cambry.

He bowed to her, and was about to content himself with this enforced courtesy, not being in the humour to exchange polite sentences with the beautiful widow, but it was she who addressed him, saying "I am very happy to have met you, sir. I came to see Monsieur Roger Darcy. It astonishes you no doubt—but there are circumstances in which one steps beyond customary limits—and I am sure you will approve of what I am doing. I am informed that your uncle is at the Palais de Justice. Do you think he will soon return?"

"I hope so, madame," replied Gaston. "I wish to see him also."

Like a well-behaved servant, the valet had stepped back, as soon as he saw his master's nephew approach the carriage.

"You have come to talk to him about Berthe," exclaimed Madame Cambry.

"What! you know then——"

"I know all and I know nothing. My people informed me this morning that a dreadful crime had been committed last night at the ball at the opera house—on a woman—and by a woman. Their narrative quite upset me. I was already quite indisposed, and had not been out for two days. I thought a drive in the Bois might revive me and that Berthe would be glad to accompany me. So I called at the Rue de Ponthieu. There was a gathering in the doorkeeper's room. My footman thereupon came and told

me that it was said there that Mademoiselle Lestérel had just been taken away by a commissary of police to appear before Monsieur Darcy, the investigating magistrate, and that she was accused of that murder. I did not believe the statement, but it frightened me. I love Berthe as I would love a sister. Your uncle had been mentioned, so I thought that he would relieve me of my disquietude and I hastened here. He is away, I learn, but you are here, you, sir, who are also interested in this dear child. Speak, I beg of you. Tell me that these rumours are unfounded—or that Berthe was erroneously suspected."

"Erroneously, yes, madame," replied Gaston bitterly; "but there are errors which kill. Mademoiselle Lestérel has been arrested after having been subjected to an examination, and, by this time, she is in prison."

"In prison! but Berthe isn't guilty. Why should she have killed this woman? And how can Monsieur Darcy have possibly signed a warrant for her arrest?"

"That is what I have come to ask him, and I swear to you, madame, whatever may be his answer, I shall not cease to believe in Mademoiselle Lestérel's innocence, and I will defend her against those who accuse her, even against my uncle, if necessary."

"I will help you, sir. I will say that Berthe is the purest, the most gentle, the most virtuous of girls: I will speak of her life, which has been but one long sacrifice; I will testify to the irreproachableness of her conduct, the nobleness of her sentiments, the goodness of her heart. I will answer for her; and I am certain that we shall save her."

Tears choked Madame Cambry's voice. Gaston, deeply moved, took her hands, and, while pressing them in his own, he saw that Berthe Lestérel's generous friend was pale and trembling. "Thanks, madame," he said warmly; "thanks for the poor persecuted girl. Yes, we will save her, and God will reward you for what you do for her. I rely on your influence to convert my uncle to our ideas; and, if you will permit it, I will keep you informed of all that is done. But I see that you are suffering, and I beg of you to let me act alone at first. My uncle will return and —"

"You are right, sir," replied Madame Cambry. "Monsieur Roger Darcy might consider my intervention premature. I shall be grateful to him if he will call to see me to-morrow. I shall have great pleasure in seeing you also, and I hope that you will soon bring me good news. Will you please tell my coachman to take me home?"

Gaston transmitted the order, and the beautiful widow's carriage started off at once. At the corner of the boulevard it passed that of the examining magistrate, who was returning from the Palais. "At last!" muttered Gaston, on seeing M. Roger Darcy spring from his brougham without waiting for the coachman to have the gate of the house opened.

M. Roger still wore his magistrate's face—a face he usually left at the door of his chambers. "Ah! here you are!" he said, somewhat coldly. "I am very glad to meet you. I have something to say to you. Wasn't it Madame Cambry that I saw just now in a carriage?"

"Yes; I found her brougham at your door."

"What! she came here to see me! In fact, why not? I always forget that I have the age of a father of a family. Do you know what she had to say to me?"

"You don't divine it?"

"I divine it now by your manner. She knows the sad news, then?"

"She learned it by going for Mademoiselle Lestérel to take her with her for a drive in the Bois de Boulogne."

M. Darcy said not a word, but his face darkened. Evidently Gaston had just caused him a painful impression by reminding him that the charming widow honoured Berthe with her friendship. He rapidly crossed the yard, followed by Gaston, who prepared himself to make a vigorous assault on his uncle's convictions, and ascended the stairs four steps at a time. This haste was an unequivocal sign of agitation of mind, and other signs soon confirmed this one. M. Darcy, on entering his study, threw his hat upon a table, his overcoat and frock coat upon a chair, donned a jacket, and went and stood before the fireplace, looking steadily at Gaston, who did not lower his eyes. There was great severity in the magistrate's look; but there was also pity, and even tenderness.

"Well, uncle?" asked Gaston, in a voice which betrayed deep emotion in spite of the efforts he made to appear calm.

"Well, my dear fellow," said his uncle, sadly, "the interview closed badly. I was obliged to change the warrant to a commitment. I make use of technical terms so that you may properly appreciate the situation. The step I have had to take prejudices nothing. I had Mademoiselle Lestérel brought before me, I questioned her, I found that there were sufficient charges against her, and that I could not yet set her at liberty. That is all there is about it."

"That means that you have sent her to prison, and to what a prison—great God!—to Saint-Lazare. Mademoiselle Lestérel, whom Madame Cambry calls her friend, is shut up with the lowest of her sex! You might at least have spared her that humiliation."

"My dear fellow, you ought to reflect before you speak. You ought also to know that no other house of detention exists in Paris for women. For thirty years and more the prefects of police have asked that another might be constructed for the reception of those arrested on suspicion, and for thirty years those who hold the purse-strings refuse to apply any funds to that purpose. They prefer to build barracks and opera houses. It is absurd; but thus it is. However, reassure yourself. Mademoiselle Lestérel will not have to submit to degrading contacts. There is more than one division in Saint-Lazare. She is in the division of suspected prisoners, and I ordered that she should be placed in a cell where she will be seen by no one but the Sisters of Marie-Joseph, who serve in the house. There is no need, I think, for me to add that she will be shown all the regard due to her social position and misfortune. She will enjoy all the favours which are not formally interdicted by the rules. I requested that she should be treated with all the consideration which is due to her, and I will see to it that my request is carried into effect."

"I am, indeed, very grateful to you," said Gaston, bitterly.

The magistrate moved impatiently, but he restrained himself. He had an excellent heart, and he divined all that his nephew must suffer. "How do you know that she is at Saint-Lazare?" he asked, after a brief pause.

"I waited at the door of the Palais de Justice. I saw the vehicle which took her come out, and I followed it."

"You did not speak to the prisoner, I hope?"

"No; I even believe that she did not see me."

"That is satisfactory. I am pleased to think that you were prudent. Listen, Gaston; you know me. I think I have proved to you that I love

you as a son. I have no other near relative but you. I saw you born. I have brought you up, and I have always excused your faults, because I am sure that you are a worthy and faithful fellow. But precisely because I regard you as my best friend, I owe you the truth. Very well. I affirm to you, then, that I did all I could to help Mademoiselle Lestérel to exculpate herself, but that I did not succeed. When she entered my office I was persuaded that she was innocent; after an examination, as kindly conducted as if it had been directed by yourself, I have come to the conclusion that she is guilty."

"Guilty!—she!—it is impossible!"

"It is evident, on the contrary. I give you my word of honour that, if a shadow of a doubt had remained to me, I should not have signed the commitment."

"Oh, I believe you, uncle. I know that you are the most enlightened and the most humane of magistrates. But I also know that every man is subject to error—that deceptive appearances can make the soundest judgment err. Look here, if I had not had the fatal idea of telling you that the poniard belonged to Mademoiselle Lestérel, you would never have dreamed of accusing her of having killed Julia."

"No, certainly not. But let me tell you, my dear friend, that it is almost always an accident which sets justice on the track of criminals. At the theatre, in melo-dramas, these accidents are called the finger of Providence. I know of many examples, but I shall not have the cruelty to quote them to you. I know too well what you feel, and I excuse you for cursing your thoughtlessness which pointed out the guilty one, for you loved her—you love her still. I also, I once loved, and I pity you with all my heart. You did not deserve to suffer this anguish. However, console yourself. The fact of having possessed that weapon did not positively show that Mademoiselle Lestérel had committed the crime. If I had not gathered other terrible and crushing proofs, Mademoiselle Lestérel would be free."

"But what has taken place in your office, then?" exclaimed Gaston. "What are these proofs?"

M. Darcy reflected for a moment, and then gently said: "I ought not to answer you. But your case and that of this unfortunate young girl is so extraordinary, you both inspire me with so much interest, that I am willing to explain to you the motives of the painful decision I arrived at. Mademoiselle Lestérel's attitude was at first excellent. She did not hesitate to declare that the poniard-bag belonged to her. She added that she had lost it on leaving Monsieur Cambry's."

"That is precisely what I thought."

"Let me finish. Mademoiselle Lestérel appeared surprised and grieved when I informed her that Julia d'Orcival was killed last night. Her astonishment and sorrow seemed to me sincere, and disposed me favourably. But, almost at once, she told me that she had been brought up at the same boarding-school as Madame d'Orcival. I was ignorant of that circumstance, and my first impressions were a little modified. That former association with the victim was to be regretted."

"Their connection ceased several years ago."

"I see that you are well informed. Mademoiselle Lestérel had spoken to you, then, of her former acquaintance with Madame d'Orcival."

"Yes; and if I did not repeat to you what she had said to me about it, it was because I attached little importance to it."

"I rather believe that you were afraid of injuring her. But I do not blame you. You were not compelled to tell me all you knew, since you were not a witness in the affair. Besides, that was nothing but presumption. I arrive at the proof. I asked Mademoiselle Lestérel what she did after leaving Madame Cambry's. She replied that she went to her sister's. I expected that reply, so I had sent for the servant who, according to the prisoner, had come and asked for her last evening at Madame Cambry's. The woman was in the waiting-room, just outside my office. I gave an order for her to be sent in. Thereupon Mademoiselle Lestérel, bursting into tears, begged me to spare her a useless confrontation, and finally declared to me that she had not been to her sister's the night before."

"What! she confessed that——"

"That she had lied? Yes, my dear Gaston. And you understand the effect that confession produced on me. I hoped that she was going to complete it by informing me where she had passed the night. She refused to do so, however. I did everything I could to induce her to explain herself; I appealed to her feelings, I employed gentle measures, I went as far as to beg of her. I represented to her the consequences of her obstinacy. I promised her the most absolute discretion in case she could not justify the employment of her time except by accusing herself of a weakness. I have no intention of wounding you in telling you this," added M. Darcy, incidentally. "I am only desirous that you should know all. And, in opening this course to the party under suspicion, I thought of you. It occurred to my mind that you were perhaps more intimately connected with her than you wished to admit. A man of honour never compromises a woman who has yielded to him——"

"You are mistaken," exclaimed Gaston. "Mademoiselle Lestérel has never been and will never be my mistress—that I swear to you."

"I believe you, my friend. Besides, she repelled this supposition, which I advanced solely in her interest, with indignation; and despite all the efforts I made, I could not induce her to speak. This refusal to reply was equivalent to an admission, and I could no longer, without failing in my duty, abandon the case. If Mademoiselle Lestérel is in prison, it is because she, in a measure, compelled me to send her there."

"Don't you see that her silence conceals a mystery; that this mystery will be cleared up sooner or later?"

"I hope so, and I shall neglect nothing to discover the truth. The investigation has scarcely commenced, and I have heard but a small number of witnesses to-day. I ought to tell you, however, that their testimony has only strengthened the presumption of Mademoiselle Lestérel's guilt."

"Then you have not heard Mariette, Mademoiselle d'Orcival's waiting-maid," asked Gaston, promptly. "I saw her, and she declared to me that she knew the culprit."

"You have seen her since the crime?"

"She came up to me while I was waiting for you at the gate of the Palais de Justice. I was only able to exchange a few words with her, because the detective who conducted her took her away. She did not have time to tell me the name of the wretched creature who killed Julia, but she will inform you of the name."

"You did wrong to speak in the street to a witness summoned before an investigating magistrate. It is all the more out of place on your part

since you aspire to become a magistrate. As to the maid, however, she gave her evidence."

"What did she say?"

"You will allow me not to repeat it to you. I have gone with you as far as I can go in the way of confidence. I cannot reveal everything to you. Let it suffice you to know that I have decided with a full knowledge of the case. A search will be made to-morrow both at the residence of Mademoiselle Lestérel, and that of Madame d'Oreival. I shall direct the perquisitions myself, and I shall, perhaps, make discoveries which will change the aspect of affairs. And then Mademoiselle Lestérel will determine, no doubt, to speak out. That will be the only way for her to improve her position. She will reflect in her cell. Solitude brings counsel."

"And so," said Gaston, "you admit that this young girl can have coolly premeditated a cowardly murder; that from an inexplicable motive, she killed a woman whom she hardly knew."

"Excuse me! I do not state that she premeditated the crime. I am inclined to think the contrary. And if you wish my opinion as to the way in which matters transpired, here it is: Mademoiselle Lestérel went to the opera house, whatever she may say. She went into box No. 27, of that I don't doubt. What did she go there for? I know nothing about that yet, but I am convinced that a violent quarrel must have arisen between her and her former schoolmate, and that, carried away by passion, she drew her poniard from the fan-sheath and dashed it into Madame d'Oreival's throat."

Gaston could not help shuddering when he heard his uncle thus explain Julia's murder. He distinctly remembered that, in Madame Cambry's drawing-room, Berthe had spoken of being subject to fits of rage: of the violence of her temper; that she had accused herself of having almost dealt M. Crozon a blow with a knife one day when he had raised his hand against his wife.

He said to himself that perhaps M. Darcy was right in believing that Berthe had, in a paroxysm of fury, stabbed Julia, who had no doubt insulted her since she had divined in her a rival.

"Who knows even whether, in striking her, she intended to kill her?" continued M. Roger. "The more I reflect, the more I am persuaded that matters must have taken place like that, and the more I am convinced that Mademoiselle Lestérel would do well to confess the truth. If I am right, if she yielded to momentary anger, I guarantee you that a jury could not be found to convict her. Everything would appeal in her favour, her antecedents, her youth, her repentance—for she will repent—she already repents, I am sure of it. She will be pardoned for having killed a fast woman who had passed her existence doing evil, and who, perhaps, wanted to corrupt her. I tell you, my dear fellow, if I was not a magistrate I should like to be a barrister to plead the cause of this young girl. I would guarantee to obtain an acquittal."

"An acquittal would not restore her tarnished reputation, her lost honour," said Gaston in a husky voice.

"No, unfortunately. The world would regard her with severity, and it would do wrong, I am one of those who think that all faults can be atoned for, and that man ought not to be less merciful than the Sovereign Judge. Mademoiselle Lestérel would be obliged to change her life, her connections, but she need not despair of the future. The past is quickly

effaced in Paris, where each day which passes leaves its recollections. Secu in the distance of this vanished past, bad deeds become confounded almost with good ones. And, besides, Mademoiselle Lestérel has all that is necessary for prompt rehabilitation—talent, intelligence, courage——”

“If there remained to her but the sad consolation of making herself forgotten, her fate would still be terrible.”

“Is it nothing, then, to save her head?”

“Her head! You think then that she will be condemned to death—executed——”

“I exaggerate. It is exceedingly seldom now-a-days that the death penalty is inflicted on a woman, and even putting things at the worst, Mademoiselle Lestérel would probably obtain extenuating circumstances. But I should pity her all the more, for I swear to you that death is preferable. You would be of my opinion if you knew as I do the rules that prevail in prisons.” M. Darcy stopped short for he perceived that his nephew was becoming pale. “Forgive me, my dear fellow, I ought to have remembered that you are not yet cured of your love for this young girl. A true love, I don’t doubt it, since you wished to marry her.”

“I wish it still,” said Gaston, in a firm voice.

“You don’t reflect! You know very well that this marriage has become impossible.”

“Why so, if Mademoiselle Lestérel is innocent? And she is; I will prove it.”

The magistrate shrugged his shoulders, and replied with a vivacity which augured ill: “Do you speak seriously?”

“Very seriously. My resolution is irrevocable.”

“And so you persist in wishing that a woman who will certainly pass before the assizes should bear your name—mine!”

“That woman is not guilty. I should be the meanest of men if I withdrew my word, giving her misfortune as a pretext. You yourself, if you were in my place, would act as I am doing.”

“I am not in question; but you have given your word, then. You are engaged to Mademoiselle Lestérel?”

“Yesterday, at Madame Cambry’s, I swore to her that she should be my wife.”

“Upon my word, you chose your time well for binding yourself. And what did she reply to this declaration?”

“That an *artiste* without a fortune could not marry your nephew, and that she would not marry me.”

“That was, certainly, disinterestedness. But then, as she refused you, you are free.”

“No; I should despise myself if I abandoned her, and you would despise me.”

“You are crazy—that is to say, you are in love, which amounts to the same thing. Listen to me. When you spoke to me last evening of this project, which so little suited me, I did not formally oppose it. I have very liberal ideas on the subject of marriage, and I am quite of the opinion that qualities of mind and of heart ought to be taken into consideration before dowry. Last evening, Mademoiselle Lestérel had an unblemished reputation. Her origin is honourable, since she is the daughter of an officer. I contented myself with preaching prudence to you, with persuading you not to decide lightly, and with begging you to wait and reflect. The young girl had just sung, ‘The pangs of the heart they last

for aye.' The occasion was a good one for asking you to think twice before exposing yourself to the sorrows predicted by the song. But I declare to you that I should have resigned myself to allow Mademoiselle Lestérel to become my niece, if you had persisted in wishing to marry her after a test, a period which I had fixed at three months. And I won't hide from you that Madame Cambry greatly approved of this marriage."

"Madame Cambry is the best and the most generous of women."

"That is my opinion. She showed you just now that she had not disowned her young friend in adversity, and I commend her for it, you may believe me. It is none the less true, however, that, since yesterday, the situation has entirely changed. Mademoiselle Lestérel is under the cloud of an ignominious accusation. I, who feel the deepest interest in her, I have had to have her arrested, so strong were appearances against her. Deceitful appearances, if you like, but the affair will, at all events, make a terrible stir. I feel certain that if you refer to this evening's newspapers, you will find two columns under this heading, in large capitals: **THE CRIME AT THE OPERA HOUSE**, and that will go on for three months, until the assizes, and even afterwards. It would be easy for me to show you the consequences of a marriage contracted under such deplorable circumstances—the magisterial profession for ever closed to you, your connection with society suddenly cut off, and your life embittered by the calumnies of the evil-minded. I might also try to move you by speaking of the disgrace which would attach to me also—to me, whom you have no reason to hate."

Gaston protested with a gesture, and his uncle continued with a logic which became more and more pointed. "I prefer, however, simply to prove to you that you are dreaming of something impossible. Mademoiselle Lestérel might be acquitted if she decided to make an avowal, and, in that case, it would not be materially impossible for you to marry her. You would then have to contend against public opinion, and that would be all. But will Mademoiselle Lestérel take the only course which can save her? The more I reflect upon it, the more I doubt it. The causes which led her to remain silent will not cease to exist from one day to another, and she has an astonishingly firm character. Very well; if she does not move the jury by confessing that anger impelled her arm, she will be convicted, that is, judging by my experience. Would you marry a condemned prisoner? No; that can't be. No more than you would marry one who was confined in Saint-Lazare under suspicion."

Gaston was unable to hide a nervous movement. The name of that hated prison cut him like a blow from a whip. He recovered himself, however, and replied with a calmness that surprised M. Darcy: "I have no objections to offer to your gloomy forebodings. If they are realised, I shall know what remains for me to do. But they will not be realised. Mademoiselle Lestérel will confess nothing, because she has nothing to confess, and Mademoiselle Lestérel will not be condemned. I will prove that she is innocent, and, when her innocence has been recognised, I will marry her."

The magistrate, somewhat disconcerted by his nephew's obstinacy, began striding to and fro. Then, after pacing five or six times up and down his study, he abruptly stopped short in front of Gaston, and said: "You will learn how to walk on the sea, for you have plenty of faith—a faith which is really tenacious. I don't approve of your stubbornness, but I shall no longer try to turn you from your project. You are a man; you

have the right to act as you please. As for me, I have the right and the duty to inform you of a resolution I have now taken. You have not forgotten, I hope, the serious interview we had together a few days ago. I signified to you that it was absolutely necessary that one of us two should marry. You have just placed yourself out of the compact. I claim my liberty again, and I shall take it upon myself to try and perpetuate our name. You will lose a fine inheritance; but you will not lose my friendship."

"That will suffice me," responded the nephew promptly.

"Now, it remains for me to inform you that, if I marry, I shall marry Madame Cambry."

"I congratulate you. I have vowed deep gratitude to Madame Cambry, and I shall be happy to be able to call her 'my aunt.'"

"I thank you, but—excuse my frankness—I don't know if she will be pleased to call Mademoiselle Lestérel 'my niece.'"

"She loves her as she would love a sister. Those are her own words. She said them to me not an hour ago."

"Yes. She is indulgent, compassionate. She has—chivalrous ideas. That qualification, although it is no longer applied to women, suits Madame Cambry exactly. She is devotion incarnate; and she has a passion for sacrificing herself. She shows it plainly, since she consents to accept me for a husband," added the amiable magistrate, smiling. "And with regard to that, you no doubt ask yourself how I am so sure of my fact. You think I am inclined to be vain, and I feel the need of rehabilitating myself in your mind. Well, last evening, while you accompanied Mademoiselle Lestérel on the piano, I finally understood what the most charming widow in the world had already several times tried to make me understand. Ah! it was necessary for her to dot her i's. I have somewhat forgotten the language she talks so well, and which, in your gay world, you have replaced by vulgarities. But I finished by remembering it, and if I did not at once give the proper reply to Madame Cambry, it was because I still had hopes in you. And I swear to you that, even now, you have but one word to say for me to pay no heed to the overtures she made me. Come, Gaston, it is yet time. Will you abandon your chimeras, and look for a wife where you can find one worthy of you? If yes, I shall still be able to renounce, without too much regret, a happiness which, I admit, commenced to tempt me. Only hasten to declare yourself, for I feel that in two or three days renunciation would be too painful. You cannot imagine how quickly a heart becomes inflamed, when after imagining it has been granted an unlimited furlough, it is suddenly recalled to activity."

These cheerful words were not able to dispel the gloomy look on Gaston's face, and still less to convert him. "I shall never forget your kindness, uncle," he said, seriously; "but, if I cannot marry Mademoiselle Lestérel, I shall not marry at all."

"Well!" sighed M. Darcy. "I see that you won't bend, and so I rely no longer on any one but myself to perpetuate us in the magistracy. Your will be done! You will be responsible for the catastrophes I risk in getting married. But I am wrong to joke when you have so much to make you sad, and I will talk seriously. You declare that you will prove to me, in time, that I made a mistake in having Mademoiselle Lestérel arrested. I wish it were possible for me to help you in this enterprise. But I am a magistrate, charged with the investigation, and my opinion is

formed. I will willingly change it if you bring me proofs in support of the innocence of the suspected party. I am not opposed to your seeking for these proofs. I will even facilitate the arduous task you impose on yourself. You can, without fear of displeasing or embarrassing me, open a counter investigation. Not only I won't impede your operations, but I will not exact from you a daily account of your movements, because I know that good blood cannot lie, and that you, the son, grandson, and nephew of magistrates, will not try to mislead justice. On the other hand, I warn you that I don't promise to keep you informed of the progress of the investigation. Still if by chance it took a favourable turn for Mademoiselle Lestérel, you can depend on my quickly bringing you the good news. The day on which I shall sign the order of discharge in favour of Mademoiselle Lestérel will be the finest day of my life, and I shall be happy to proclaim that I was mistaken. While waiting for that day to dawn, we will fight with the weapons of courtesy, and I sincerely desire that the victory will remain with you."

Gaston, moved to tears, took his uncle's hand and pressed it cordially. "I accept your conditions with gratitude," he said, "and I have but one question to ask of you: 'Shall I be permitted to see Mademoiselle Lestérel?'"

"At first, no," replied M. Darcy, after reflection. "Later on, however, when the investigation is sufficiently advanced, so that no inconvenience can arise from dispensing with secrecy, I might, perhaps, authorise an interview. But I promise you nothing. Now, will you dine with me?"

"Thank you. But I have not a minute to lose. I must leave you."

"Where are you going, then?"

"To the help of a woman who will be your niece."

At these words, which summed up the situation, Gaston Darcy took his hat and went out running like a crazy man. His uncle did not try to detain him, and to tell the truth, any attempt of the kind would have been useless.

Where was this excited lover going? What could he do to succour poor Berthe? He did not know yet, but he was resolved to enter upon the campaign immediately, and he relied on two excellent auxiliaries—on Madame Cambry, who had just so warmly expressed her sympathy for Mademoiselle Lestérel, and on his friend Nointel, who was at the same time a good counsellor and a man of action. He could not present himself at once at his future aunt's, but he was almost sure of finding the captain smoking a cigar by the fire in his apartments in the Rue d'Anjou. Night was commencing to set in, and Nointel, who had some elegant habits, always returned home to dress before going to dine at the club or elsewhere. Darcy sprang into his brougham and was driven to his friend's. He was heart-sick, but not discouraged. Those who are violently in love hesitate at nothing. The information he had just received from the investigating magistrate was, however, of a character to relieve him of all illusions as to the chances of success remaining to him. He knew that his uncle exercised his formidable functions with rare impartiality. He also knew that M. Darcy, far from being prejudiced against Berthe, was, on the contrary, quite disposed to believe her innocent, and that he had sent her to prison only because the evidence compelled him to do so. And what proof indeed was more overwhelming than the young girl's persistency in refusing to explain the employment of her time during that fatal Saturday night? "I will explain it," said Gaston to himself; "I will

explain it in spite of her, if it is necessary, and if I don't succeed in doing so, Nointel will."

One of the hypothesis advanced by the magistrate troubled him more, that of the murder committed in a fit of anger; but he forgave Made-moiselle Lestérel in advance for this unpremeditated crime, and he swore to himself that she should none the less become Madame Gaston Darcy. It must be admitted that he gave far too little thought to the fact that Julia had been his mistress, and that the world at large would with reason be shocked at his marrying the woman who had killed her. But passion stifles scruples, and that which Berthe had inspired in his heart had reached a climax.

Gaston had calculated correctly on at least one point. When he reached the Rue d'Anjou, Nointel was at home. The captain would not have been able to settle himself so luxuriously if he had only had the income derived from his father to depend upon. But, well advised and extremely intelligent in all the affairs of life, he had employed the whole of a somewhat large legacy, which had fallen to him from a distant relative the year before, in furnishing his suite of rooms. He had still ample to live upon, according to his tastes, and he had made a very intelligent use of this windfall. Fifteen years of garrison life and campaign duty had predisposed him in favour of having a more than comfortable home. The suite of apartments was not large, but the windows opened on to a large garden filled with old trees and fresh flowers, and this coquettish lodging did not lack shade in the summer or sunshine in the winter.

Nointel lived there like a sage, served by a valet, and a cook who was an expert in her profession. He was so perfectly satisfied there that he remained at home as much as possible, although he had not renounced the pleasures which an intelligent man knows how to glean in the various circles of Parisian society, without risking his heart too much or squandering his money too lavishly. Darcy, who scattered his tender caresses and fortune to every breeze, greatly admired his friend's prudence, but took no pride in imitating him. "I was expecting you," said the captain to him as soon as he entered the smoking room.

"Why did you expect me?" asked Gaston as he threw himself into an easy-chair.

"Why, because strange things happened last night at the opera house ball. Poor Julia! I had little esteem for her, but I really pity her. She did not deserve to end like that. And, to tell the truth, I don't in the least understand this ugly business. A fast woman murdered by another woman in a box during a ball, why it is something unheard of, and is enough to mislead the well-known sagacity of the illustrious Lolif."

"Do you know the sequel?"

"The sequel? why, the sequel will be Julia's funeral—and a little later on the sale of her splendid furniture and marvellous pictures. All Paris will be at that sale, although there will be less than twenty persons at the cemetery. So goes the world."

"That isn't what I meant. I ask you if you have heard that they have arrested——"

"The scoundrel of a woman who killed Madame d'Orcival? Yes, I have just left the club, and it was said there that justice had laid its hand on the guilty party—a governess, I think—or a pianist—no, I have it now, a vocalist who gives lessons and sings at concerts. What the deuce could Julia have done to that girl? A rivalry, perhaps. I'll bet that Golymine

was mixed up in it. It seems that your uncle is charged with the investigation. But what is the matter with you? You are turning green!"

"Listen to me," said Darcy, in a quick and abrupt tone. "That singer's name is Berthe Lestérel."

"In fact, that is exactly the name they mentioned. But now I think of it, you must know her, for she sang at houses you often visit—at the Marchioness de Barancos' and at Madame Cambry's."

"I will immediately tell you her story and mine. In two words, this is the situation: I love her; I have offered to marry her, and I will marry her, whatever happens."

Nointel looked his friend steadily in the eyes, and asked him quietly: "Are you becoming crazy? or are you poking fun at me?"

"Neither the one nor the other. I love this girl as I have never loved any one else. It was because I loved her that I left Julia, and that I refused all the marriage proposals my uncle made to me."

The captain shook his head, and began whistling to himself quite low.

"You see that it is serious," resumed Gaston.

"So serious," said Nointel, "that it seems to me as though I have been hit on the head with a paving-stone. So this was the fine love-affair you were hiding from me. The deuce! you were not fortunate in your choice, and I deplore your bad luck."

"Thanks; but I expect something more than compliments of condolence from your friendship."

"You know very well that I am entirely yours, everywhere and always. Only I don't see how I can be of use to you. It seems to me that if you have a favour to ask for—this person, you would do better to apply to your uncle."

"My uncle thinks she is guilty."

"And you, you think she is innocent?"

"I am sure of it, and I have sworn to prove it. Will you help me in doing so?"

"Of course. I ask no better. But I own to you that Monsieur Darcy's opinion impresses me but little in favour of the young lady. She is in prison, I suppose?"

"Yes, since an hour ago."

"Hum! if your uncle had had the least doubt— Did you tell him that you loved her, and had taken it into your head to marry her?"

"I have just told him so."

"And how did he receive the declaration?"

"As he ought to receive it. He thinks it quite natural that I should try to prove that he has made a mistake in having Mademoiselle Lestérel arrested. He even recognises the fact that appearances may sometimes mislead justice."

"Then you hope to convince him of it. So you intend to enter into a struggle against the magistracy and its auxiliaries, to open and to conduct a counter-investigation."

"That is it exactly."

"And you rely on me to second you?"

"Yes. Am I wrong?"

"No, my dear fellow. I am not versed in criminal proceedings, and I don't possess Lolif's special aptitude for clearing up judicial mysteries, but I flatter myself that I am not wanting in common sense, or in knowledge of men, and I know Paris well. These simple qualities are at your

service, and, to oblige you, I am ready to sacrifice myself. Only I don't know the first word of the affair. It will be necessary for you to commence by describing it to me point by point."

"That is just my intention."

"It is also necessary—this is more delicate—it is also necessary for you to explain yourself frankly, categorically, without disguising or omitting anything respecting your acquaintance with Mademoiselle Lestérel, her antecedents, and character. In a word, so that I may be able to defend her, it is necessary that I should know her as well as you know her yourself."

"Perfectly. I will conceal nothing from you, and, besides, I *have* nothing to conceal."

"Go on, then. Don't be afraid to enter into details, and allow me to interrupt you whenever I have any need of supplementary information."

Darcy commenced at the commencement—that is to say, with the story of his love. He related how he had noticed Berthe, how he had been smitten with her, with bad motives at first, and then with good ones; he stated all he knew about her, all that had passed between them from his first attempt, virtuously repelled by Mademoiselle Lestérel, to the nocturnal meeting at the corner of the Rue Royale, the scene at Madame Crozon's, and the incidents of the evening before at Madame Cambry's. He had a sound mind, and clearness of speech, and he was precise, and did not lose himself in useless digressions.

Accordingly, when the captain had heard his narrative, he found himself so well informed that he exclaimed: "My dear fellow, you were born to preside over an assize court, for you sum up to perfection. Now, pass to the judicial proceedings, and dwell upon the charges brought against the accused. Here you are not on the defence; you are expounding."

Darcy took up his narrative where he had broken it off. He spoke of his visit to the Palais de Justice, of his imprudent revelation respecting the Japanese poniard, and of the disastrous consequences brought about by that revelation. He ended by faithfully repeating what his uncle had just informed him of, in reference to the present stage of the investigation, and did not fail to expatiate on Mademoiselle Lestérel's fatal persistence in refusing to give any answer when the most benevolent of magistrates urged her to explain herself as to the employment of her time that night. Neither did he forget to state that Madame Cambry believed in Berthe's innocence, and had promised to sustain her cause. And when he had finished he looked at Nointel very much as a lawyer looks at the jury before whom he has just delivered his argument. He tried to read on the captain's face the effect his discourse had produced. But the captain remained impenetrable. He was reflecting.

"My dear Darcy," he said, after a somewhat long silence, "I owe you, in the first place, a painful avowal. I am obliged to declare to you that not a single magistrate could be found in France who would have taken it upon himself to leave Mademoiselle Lestérel at liberty. At least, that is my opinion."

"It is also mine," replied Darcy, resolutely; "but that does not prove she is guilty."

"No. There are strong presumptions against her; while in her favour there are but doubts, obscurities, and uncertainties. The game is not an even one. We shall have great trouble to win it."

"Then you abandon it?"

"Not the least in the world. I perceive that we have some trump cards in our hand. I will be your partner, and will sustain you vigorously. My plan is formed."

"Let us see it!" said Darcy, eagerly.

"My dear fellow, it would take time to explain it to you, and we have none to lose, for we are going to begin the campaign this very evening."

"What do you intend to do, then?"

"I intend to dine with you at a restaurant, and then go with you to the opera house, where there is a performance, although it's Sunday."

"What, do you imagine I am in the humour to go to the opera house on the day that Mademoiselle Lestérel——"

"Excuse me, my dear friend, the man really bent upon a certain aim cares nothing for the means he employs. It is not by remaining lamenting in your chimney-corner that you will make any discoveries. At the opera house we shall find a box-opener, who will, perhaps, tell us many things. At the restaurant where I wish to take you, we shall meet two personages whom I am anxious to question. And that is not all. After the theatre, we will go to the club, where one may sometimes listen to instructive conversations. Lolif will be there, and I take it upon myself to draw from him all that can be drawn. To obtain the information we need, I would, if necessary, go and take supper in a night restaurant, or dance at a *barrière* ball. And I expect you to follow me everywhere. Ah!" added the captain, seeing Darcy make a gesture, "I know what you are about to say to me, and I will reply to it in advance. You don't care for diversion; I realise it, but it musn't be perceived; it is particularly necessary that it shouldn't be known that you love Mademoiselle Lestérel and wish to marry her. If that were suspected, everything would be hidden from us. Now, at the present time no one knows it; is it not so?"

"No one except yourself, my uncle, and Madame Cambry."

"Three friends. Lolif doesn't know it; Simancas and Saint-Galmier don't know it; Madame d'Orcival's maid does not know it either."

"Marianne? No, and she promised to come and see me to-morrow morning. But there is Prébord, who may suspect——"

"He will be made to shut up if he takes it into his head to talk. Keep the secret of your love, then. Your uncle will certainly keep it, and he will also beg Madame Cambry to keep it. It is the only chance we have of succeeding. What do you say? Have I converted you to my ideas?"

"Pretty nearly so."

"Well, this evening I will convert you altogether. Meanwhile, go home and dress, and come back for me at seven o'clock."

VIII.

At half-past seven Darcy and Nointel were walking across the Place de l'Opéra. The campaign had opened. Darcy had reached the rendezvous punctually, and the captain, who liked walking, had begged him to send his carriage away. It was fine, and the Rue d'Anjou is not far from the boulevard. The two friends walked along side by side, saluting with a nod such men of their set whom they met on that privileged pavement, where there are so many familiar faces to those who live "Parisian life"

—the life that is spent between the race-course at Longchamps, the Parc Monceau, and Tortoni's.

Darcy had reflected deeply while dressing, and the captain's plan now appeared to him well conceived. He realised all the importance of this skilful tactician's recommendations, and no longer thought of sitting down at home while the opening of an investigation was in question. An examining magistrate has no need to disturb himself to investigate an affair. He has, so to speak, but to raise a finger to set all the wheels of the judicial machinery in motion. The witnesses are at his orders, and information comes to him from all sides. Gaston was obliged to take more trouble. He quite understood the necessity of starting on a voyage of discovery, as difficult, if not as perilous, as the search for the North Pole, and he asked no better than to sacrifice himself, although it went hard with him to frequent the resorts of pleasure, while Berthe Lestérel was weeping in prison.

However, although he had not made Nointel explain the details of his project, he followed him confidently, and without divining where his circumspect comrade was taking him to dine.

Just as they reached the Place de l'Opéra, the lights of the lobby were being lighted, and Darcy felt heart-sick on again viewing the *façade* which had been so brilliantly illuminated the evening before—the steps which Julia d'Orcival had so lightly ascended, without suspecting that she was hastening to her death. Loungers, grouped on the circular places of refuge, were chatting noisily, and as Darcy passed by, he caught some words relating to the crime. All Paris was already talking about it; the newspaper-hawkers were shouting it out, and the Sunday promenaders did not fail to stop before the theatre usually devoted to singing and dancing, but now bloodstained by a tragedy. The poor fellow even heard a loiterer mention the name of Lestérel, and he hastened to quicken his step.

"I had to use all my strength to restrain myself from springing at the throat of that blackguard who was holding forth in the midst of those fools," he murmured, taking Nointel's arm.

"The deuce!" said the prudent captain; "you would have done something foolish there, and I advise you to moderate yourself if you are anxious to succeed. Paris is full of Lolifs, and you won't close their mouths, for, I suppose, you haven't formed the project of strangling them all. Twenty, a hundred times, will your unfortunate friend be talked about before you. You must resign yourself to let folks talk. If you take her defence, you will disarrange all our combinations. Prepare yourself to suffer."

"Will my patience be put to the test during the dinner?"

"Probably. You must guess that I haven't left the pleasures of my chimney-corner for the sole delight of taking you to a restaurant."

"Where are we going, in fact? To Bignon's or the Café Anglais?"

"No. I am taking you to the Maison d'Or."

"Ah!" said Gaston, indifferently.

"The cooking there is very commendable," continued Nointel; "but I am not going there this evening to regale myself. The attraction for me is the burgraves."

"The burgraves?"

"That is to say, the fast livers who have passed their fiftieth year. They have remained faithful to the restaurant of their youth, and take

delight in drinking to their old loves. It often happens that on the looking-glasses of the rooms they find engraved the sweet names of women who have long since disappeared, but who charmed their earlier years, and are now gone where the old moons go. These old blokes study archæology while they sup."

"Very well, but what connection——"

"This is it. Simancas and Saint-Galmier pretend to be burgraves—of America. They like to dine in good company, and I am pretty sure that we shall find them installed in a certain corner of the first room, a select corner, reserved for them every evening. And if we succeed in locating ourselves in their vicinity, we shall enjoy their conversation."

"I see no pleasure in that."

"You are mistaken. I shall know how to give it an interesting turn, and you won't regret having come."

"Do you hope to obtain from them some information about—— Ah, of course—now, I think of it—they occupied the box next to Julia's the other night."

"What! you had forgotten that curious circumstance! Lolif called you attention to it enough."

"That's true. But what would you have? Just now, I have lost my head."

"Fortunately, I have coolness for two."

"And excellent ideas. It is impossible that these foreigners, who observe everything, did not notice the woman whom Julia received in her box—and by questioning them——"

"I shall take good care not to do that. Simancas is as mistrustful as an Indian half-breed, which he is, and Saint-Galmier has the prudence of a serpent, the emblem of his profession. These honourable citizens of the New World are always afraid of compromising themselves. And I earnestly beg of you to be circumspect with them. Let me manage them. I understand how to draw some useful information from them. Your part is already laid out for you. When the crime at the opera house is in question, content yourself with expressing your pity for Madame d'Orcival's fate, and talk about the person who is accused of having killed her as you would talk about the Shah of Persia. But here we are. Wait a little till I see if they are there," added the captain on turning the corner of the Rue Laflitte.

"Everything is perfect," he continued, after glancing into the room through an opening in the curtains. "They are eating oysters and have some iced champagne near them. That is a good augury. Oysters open the appetite, and Moët loosens the tongue. There is an unoccupied table next to theirs. We are decidedly in luck. Let us profit by it." And returning to the door on the boulevard, the captain entered the restaurant.

Gaston, who closely followed him, had a passing vision on crossing the threshold of this saloon, brilliant with lights and gilding. He thought that in a fugitive dream he could perceive the dark cell at Saint-Lazare. Contrast had evoked this lugubrious apparition, and the sensation was so real that tears started to his eyes.

"Monsieur Nointel here!" exclaimed Simancas. "This is what I call an event."

"A happy event," added the Canadian doctor. "And here is Monsieur Darcy. The *fête* is complete. I hope we are going to be neighbours."

"Very willingly," replied the captain. "We will even join you in your picnic, if a fusion would be agreeable to you. It is still time, I think. You have hardly commenced."

"We would re-commence, if that were necessary, to have the pleasure of dining with you," answered Simancas.

"That's useless, my dear general. We will adhere to your bill of fare. I am sure it must be an excellent one."

"It is I who arranged it, and I understand it pretty well," said Saint-Galmier, modestly. "After the oysters, we shall have a bisque; then, as the next course, a carp *à la* Chambord; next, quails on toast, with marrow; a redbreast pie, and, as side-dishes, an iced bomb of brown bread—a novelty which I am introducing—in fact, a Canadian importation. Tour-Blanche, with the oysters and fish. Château-Larose, to moisten the quails; and, to finish, some Moët's Brut Impérial, iced like sherbet."

"That's perfect, doctor. If I leave here with a fit of indigestion, I rely on you."

"Never fear, captain. The dinners I order are always digestible. I will order for four."

Nointel had already installed himself beside the general, and Darcy seated himself opposite his friend, to the doctor's left. Berthe's friend made unheard-of efforts to appear gay, and succeeded but poorly. The cell, the hideous cell, was constantly before his eyes.

"What good wind has brought you here, gentlemen?" asked Simancas. "We, who frequent this restaurant, have never seen you here before."

"That's true. I have formed the homely habit of dining at home, that is since I possess a cook, who prepares special dishes for me. The siege of Paris made a glutton of me—I ate so much horse-flesh then. Our dinner at the club is good, but the tiresome people one meets there have driven me away. And this evening, my friend Darcy being troubled with gloomy thoughts, I proposed as a diversion that we should go somewhere and eat extravagantly."

"Gloomy fancies—hypochondriasis—nervous affection of the liver," muttered the doctor of the Quebec University. "I treat that complaint with a dietetic system, and I always cure it."

"It is cured better with Château-Larose, is it not, Darcy?"

"Oh, it has already passed off," said Darcy, trying to smile. "On the other hand, I am terribly hungry and as thirsty as a bell-ringer."

"An excellent symptom, dear sir; when a man has a sorrow it should be drowned."

"Ah, I understand, sir," said Simancas, with a sorrowful air, "I understand that you must have been painfully affected on learning about Madame d'Orcival's tragic death?"

Nointel glanced at his friend with a look which signified: "You see that he is coming to the point of his own accord. Be on your guard."

"Yes," replied Darcy, much affected, "I had just broken off my relations with Julia, but I still cherished excellent recollections of her. The news dismayed me."

"It grieved Saint-Galmier and myself," said the general, "and surprised us all the more as we were in the next box to her at the ball—at least so it appears, for we did not recognise her under her costume of black and white. And we have since been told that the crime was no doubt committed very shortly after our departure. Would that we had remained a little longer. Our presence might have stayed the arm of the murderer,"

"Of the murderess, my dear general," corrected Saint-Galmier, laughing. "You know very well that it was a woman, and that we saw her, the wretch. When I think that I was almost in contact with a creature who will end her life on the scaffold, *brrr!* I have goose flesh. This bisque is delicious—not peppered quite enough though—it is fortunate that they have her."

"The bisque?"

"No, the murderess. I have every reason to believe that we shall be called as witnesses, Simancas and I. If she is brought before me I shall recognise her, I answer for that—but on conditions that she is presented in a domino—for she was careful not to show her heinous face—I'll bet that it's heinous—but there is the general appearance, the figure——"

"Oh! oh! I perceive the carp *à la Chambord*. A glass of Moët to back it, captain," said Simancas.

"Well, let us back it," said Nointel, holding out his glass.

"And you, Monsieur Darcy," asked Saint-Galmier.

"Thanks, presently."

"Yes, I can understand it, dear sir. A man is out of sorts on the day after so sad an event. Poor woman! To die so young, so beautiful—and so rich. But your sorrow won't resuscitate her. And then Moët is mourning."

"In Canada?" asked the captain, ironically.

"Everywhere. This carp is a vision. I recommend you the milt mixed with truffles. What a sale Paris will shortly see in that mansion on the Boulevard Malesherbes! For it will be a forced sale. It seems that Madame d'Orcival leaves neither a will nor relations. She was a natural child. The State will be her heir. My Jove, I shall try to obtain a *souvenir* of that charming woman, who will certainly have her place in the history of modern gallantry. I recollect a certain *bonheur du jour*, in rose-wood—pure Louis XV—a marvel; I must present it to myself."

"You have been to Julia's, then?" asked Darcy.

"Not later than last Monday, the day after Golymine's suicide. She sent for me because she was suffering with an intercostal nervous affection. You know that these nervous affections never resist my system. I should have cured Madame d'Orcival, if she had not been taken from me by the assassin."

Darcy thought: "It is strange that Julia should have had recourse to Saint-Galmier. I told her all the evil I thought about the charlatan."

"Ah!" sighed Simancas, "since my friend has mentioned the name of that unfortunate Golymine, I must tell these gentlemen of an idea which has occurred to me. Don't you think that the count's sad end brought misfortune to Madame d'Orcival?"

"You are suspicious, then, general?" said Nointel.

"No, but I am struck with the fact that the murder so soon followed the suicide—a suicide which Madame d'Orcival herself caused."

"Well, now, as for me, I believe differently. I believe that Madame d'Orcival knew Golymine's secrets; that she must have entertained the unfortunate idea of making use of them, and that she was killed by a woman who had been the mistress of that Pole—a woman whom she wished to blackmail. Come, what do you say to that?" asked Nointel, looking Simancas straight in the eyes.

Simancas possessed the coolness of a warrior who has grown old under the flag, and the assurance of a man who, in the course of a long and

stormy existence, has passed through many difficulties. And yet Nointel's question, put to him point-blank, disconcerted him a little.

"I think that you are mistaken, my dear sir," he said, with some hesitation. "If Golymine had had secrets of that kind, he would not have confided them to a woman of that character——"

"Whom he adored; don't let us forget it," interrupted the captain, "but who, all the same, may have intercepted them."

"I admit that that conjecture had not presented itself to my mind. I did not know Madame d'Orcival, but I knew the count very well—formerly—and I don't believe that he was a man to take improper advantage of his conquests. The proof that he did not use them to his profit is that he died poor. Only a few thousand franc notes were found on his person, and he leaves nothing but his wardrobe, which is of no great value. I made inquiries at his last lodgings. Everything has already been seized, for he had numerous creditors."

"Still another sale on the horizon," said Saint-Galmier, philosophically; "a very bare one that. These pretty quails lying on toast with marrow are much fatter. What a look! What a flavour!"

"I think them a success," said Nointel; "and now it seems to me the Château-Larose ought to come in. But, by the way, what kind of a man was this Golymine in reality? You knew him, doctor?"

"Oh! very little indeed; I attended him once for a sword thrust, but I was not his friend."

"Didn't you act as sponsor for him when he presented himself at our club?"

"Yes, to please the general. They had formerly fought together for the independence of Peru."

"That's true," said Simancas gravely. "We were companions in arms, and I can affirm that Golymine, like all his compatriots, was extravagantly brave."

"I don't doubt it," said Nointel; "but how did he conduct himself with women?"

"Well, he did not take me for a confidant, but I think that he always acted very correctly. He passed for being very generous, and I am certain that he was very discreet, for he never said a word to me about his love affairs."

"And yet he had a great many, and in all circles of society, too—for, when he first made his appearance, he went everywhere. He was often seen at the residence of that haughty Marchioness de Barancos."

"I have heard so, but I cannot testify to it. I had not the honour of the marchioness's acquaintance at that time."

"In fact," said Darcy, "I don't remember having ever seen you at her residence."

"No, I kept aside for personal reasons. I had known her, however, for several years. The late Marquis de Barancos was Captain-General at Havana when I was there. I was then working for the enfranchisement of Cuba, which was trying to escape from Spanish domination. The governor had me expelled, so the widow and myself were on cold terms. But quite recently I learned that she no longer remembered that old story, and I had the honour of presenting myself at her residence this very day."

"Ah, to-day! said the captain. "She receives on Sunday, then?"

"One thing is certain—that is, that she received me—and with perfect

grace. She did me the honour of inviting me to a grand *fête* which she proposes giving very shortly."

"Accept my compliments, general. Madame de Barancos' house is one of the most agreeable that there are in Paris. For myself, I go very little into society; but my friend Darcy does not miss one of the marchioness's balls, and he will be delighted to meet you there. And so you have seen her to-day?" continued Nointel, in an easy manner. "Did you speak to her about Golymine?"

The general moved uneasily on his chair, and replied quickly: "What are you thinking of, captain? I know how to conduct myself, and I was very careful not to utter the name of that Pole. She can scarcely flatter herself on having known him, for he came to a bad end. Besides, in what connection would I have spoken to her about the count?"

"Why, in connection with the crime at the opera house, of course. It isn't possible that Madame de Barancos is ignorant of the news of the day, and she must be aware of the fact that Golymine had been Julia's lover."

"I—I do not know," stammered Simancas. "There was no question of that between us—and I——"

"Gentlemen," exclaimed Saint-Galmier, "salute the red-breast *pâté*. This is a dish I have brought into fashion, and I beg of you to partake of it devoutly. Let the marchionesses and the Poles go, and admire this delicious crust. With your permission, I will commence the autopsy."

"Pooh! what an ugly word! I can see from here one of your fellow doctors entering that charming residence on the Boulevard Malesherbes with a commissary of police, and—you have spoilt my appetite. The deuce take me if I touch your *pâté*. And then, to eat red-breasts! You *dilettanti* of the palate, you respect nothing. You would put *fauvets* into a ragout, and nightingales on the spit."

"Don't joke. I have tasted them. They are delicious."

"I will take your word for it. I prefer to hear them sing. Good! that remark reminds me of Golymine.* The marchioness did not weep over his death, I think, or over that of Julia either. She could not have liked that high-flying fast woman, who had equipages almost as handsome as her own. Do you remember last summer when Madame d'Orcival came to the Grand Prix de Paris in an eight-spring barouche, which compared so well with that of Madame de Barancos? And her victoria trimmed with yellow satin, with an otter rug, dark grey horses, and all the harness plated with silver? The marchioness never had one so stylish. Do you remember it, Darcy?"

Darcy remembered it all the better because it was he who had paid for it; but he only replied in unintelligible monosyllables. He scarcely knew what was in question. His mind was wandering for the moment in the Faubourg Saint-Denis. He saw the cab, the horrible cab, jolting Berthe Lestérel over the muddy pavement, and stopping at the door of Saint-Lazare.

"Well," continued Nointel, "the marchioness does not regret Madame d'Orcival, but she is inquisitive. If she were not, she wouldn't be a woman. She asked for some details about the horrible event, and as you were almost a witness of it, you gave them to her, I have no doubt of it. You must have interested her extremely."

* To sing in French is *chanter*, and the same word is used for blackmail.—*Trans.*

"Oh, very little, I assure you. I merely touched upon that gloomy subject. Madame de Barancos likes cheerful conversation. Besides, I had a multitude of things to tell her. It is quite natural, after so long an intermission. I knew her very well in Havana, when she was the wife of the Captain-General, and I found her again a queen in France, queen by her beauty, by her luxury——"

"And a little by her eccentricities. No women are liked here but those who make themselves talked about. Ah! I can understand that she is in no hurry to marry. It is more amusing to astonish Paris than to govern Cuba."

"I don't think that she has renounced marriage," insinuated Simancas.

"Then, in your place, general, I should try to marry her."

"Don't laugh at me, my dear captain. Certainly my race is as good as hers. Like her, I have some of the blood of the old Castilian Christians in my veins; but I am nothing but a veteran covered with wounds, honourably received, it is true."

"Bah! you would make a very presentable husband, and I will bet that your heart has not yet retired on a pension. A soldier has no age."

"Simancas is always in his twenties," exclaimed the doctor, "and that thanks to my dietetic system. I am his doctor, and I will guarantee that he will attain to his hundredth year without growing old. Now, gentlemen, I call your kind attention to the iced bomb of brown bread. Don't you think that it will be as well to support it with a few glasses of generous port?"

"Agreed. Especially as it seems to me that your bill of fare necessitates the reinforcement of a heavy wine. You have made us partake of a feminine dinner, my dear Saint-Galmier."

"That is better than a dinner with women. The presence of women prevents the appreciation of good cooking."

"We agree on that, but it is pleasant to talk about them. And at the risk of displeasing you, I return to the marchioness. I say, do you know that the person accused of having killed Julia is a young artiste, who sang at all the concerts given by Madame de Barancos?"

Gaston turned pale, and Nointel glanced at him significantly. "Excuse me, my friend," said that look—"forgive me for causing you to suffer. It is for Mademoiselle Lestérel's good."

"My faith! no," replied Simancas. "I was told that a young girl had been arrested, but nothing was said as to her profession. And I believe that the marchioness is no better informed than myself."

"That is very fortunate. She would have been painfully affected if she had known that the crime was committed by a person who had visited her house."

"Oh! in the capacity of a paid artiste. Madame de Barancos probably never paid any attention to her, and, as far as I am concerned——"

"Gentlemen," interrupted Gaston Darcy, "would you be pleased to change the conversation? What pleasure can you find in talking over that wretched affair? As for me, it makes me sick at heart, I must own it, and I shall be greatly obliged to you if you will talk about something else."

"Monsieur Darcy is right," exclaimed Simancas and Saint-Galmier in chorus. "Let us talk of something else."

And the doctor added: "What dessert would you like, my lords? In my opinion a nice Brie cheese and a few bunches of grapes would be a fit termination to this modest repast."

The captain adopted the doctor's opinion. He was not thinking of choosing a cheese. He was saying to himself: "Darcy is incorrigible. Nothing can be done with that fellow. He stopped me just as I was pushing an intelligent reconnaissance into the marchioness' domains. Fortunately, I shall come across Simancas again; and I will ply him without saying anything to Gastou, who is much too sensitive. For the present, we have nothing more to do here, and I will try to cut the sitting short."

The dessert appeared, and was briskly despatched, accompanied by champagne.

Saint-Galmier drank like a Canadian, as he was, and Simancas derogated that evening from the proverbial sobriety of the Spanish race. It was evident that he was in a joyful humour, although he had lost none of his gravity. The doctor showed less address, and gave rein to his elocution. He talked politics, finance, hygiene; he disserted on medicine and women, and he especially celebrated his infallible treatment for nervous affections, but he did not reveal the least information calculated to prove useful to the captain, who listened to his chatter with praiseworthy attention.

Gaston began to grow very impatient, and trod on Nointel's foot, to acquaint him with his desire to depart.

It was, however, necessary to wait for the coffee and the liqueurs which Saint-Galmier set great store by; but, finally, they lighted their cigars, and the general made this overture: "Aren't you of the opinion, gentlemen, that the club is the only place where one can decently spend a Sunday evening? If you so feel inclined, we will willingly engage in a game of whist with you there."

"A thousand thanks," replied the captain, "Darcy and I have a visit to make, in the first place, at the further end of the Faubourg Saint-Germain. It is half-past nine. We are going to pay for our share and leave you. We will join you again about midnight."

And he called for the waiter to ask him for the bill, which was not a trifle. Red-breast *pâtés* are high priced. The Americans did not insist on retaining them, but declared that, having nothing to do, they were in no hurry about raising the siege. Gaston and the captain left them at the table, and on setting foot on the boulevard, Nointel said to his friend: "I was careful not to tell them that we were going to the opera house. I don't care to have them at my heels."

"Nor I," grumbled Darcy; "but will you explain to me in what way that wearisome dinner has served us? You forced me to submit to the company of those two disagreeable personages, and you were not able to draw the least explanation from them."

"You are mistaken."

"What more do you know, then? That this doctor, or self-styled such, brags that he could recognise the woman in a domino who came to the box. The fine assertion!"

"You see nothing in that. Well, I learned something from which I shall derive profit later on."

"And what is that?"

"I have learned that Simancas, who never before in his life, say what he may, set foot at Madame de Barancos', presented himself at her residence to-day, and that she received him very well, and invited him to the ball she is going to give."

"And you conclude from that——"

"My dear fellow, the marchioness does not willingly receive a man with the tarnished reputation of this Simancas. If she admits him now, after having so long closed her doors to him, it is because she has a reason for acting so."

"What reason?"

"You torment me. What! you don't understand that if, for instance, Simancas saw the marchioness enter Madame d'Orcival's box last night, he would possess a secret which would give him a hold on the said marchioness?"

"Yes, for then it would be she who killed Julia," exclaimed Darcy much moved. "And you think that—"

"I am sure of nothing. At the opera house, where I am now taking you, we shall learn more about it. Do you still regret, now, having dined with those two scoundrels?"

Darcy did not reply to the question addressed to him by Nointel. He had no absolute confidence in the efficacy of the means employed by the captain for discovering the truth, and he had impatiently submitted to the company of those two foreigners of doubtful character. He recognised, however, that Simancas' sudden reception by the marchioness was a fact to be noted. But he thought his friend took very roundabout ways for proving Berthe's innocence; and he was not persuaded that he had not lost his time in dining with the general and the doctor.

"I see," continued Nointel, laughing, "that you don't yet appreciate my system of investigation at its just value. It is the only one, however, that can conduct us to the object in view. It is slow, but sure. You will render me justice later on. In the meantime, I am quite determined to follow this course. I even declare to you that if you should give up the pursuit of the counter-investigation, I would take it up on my own account, for I perceive that the business has charms for me. I begin to understand Lolif."

"And so we are going to the opera house," murmured Darcy. "God knows what the people who see me there will say about me. Julia was assassinated there last night, and all Paris knows that she was still my mistress not a week ago."

"The young ladies there will say that men have no hearts. Your comrades of the club will say that you are a great fellow. The women of society will not feel very unkindly disposed towards you for your indifference as to the death of an 'irregular.' What do you care for the opinion of people whom you see so little? Mademoiselle Lestérel will never know that you have been to listen to the 'Prophète' this evening. And it is in her interest you are going there. You have nothing to reproach yourself with."

"So be it. I have decided to follow you everywhere. But I admit that I expect nothing from a conversation with the box-opener. In the first place, I believe she has already been questioned by my uncle."

"Very well, we will cross-examine her, as is done in England in criminal proceedings, and we shall perhaps draw from her some information yet unknown. I know the box-openers, and know how to make them talk. That is a science which the most skilful magistrates don't possess. The box-openers constitute a sub-species of women. I have studied them, and especially at the opera house, during the three years that I have been a subscriber. You are a subscriber also, and you ought to know them. But you have only studied the young ladies of the ballet. That is wrong.

The mothers are much more interesting to an observer. And if, by chance, the box-opener who has charge of No. 27 has a daughter in the ballet, I shall know how to win her confidence—for Julia was assassinated in No. 27, according to the evening papers.”

“You know that box-opener?”

“I am not certain. I did not notice who were on duty last night in the corridor of the first tier. But we are going to begin by taking a turn in the passage which leads to the bloody box—melo-dramatic style—and I have a vague presentiment that all will turn out well.”

This conversation had brought the two friends to the Place de l'Opéra. Gaston, half convinced, allowed himself to be led on, and they entered the theatre. On seeing them pass, the employés looked at them particularly. They knew their names, since they both figured on the list of subscribers, and they ought not to have been ignorant of the fact that Darcy had been Julia d'Orcival's last lover. This mute manifestation troubled Gaston. It proved that he must expect to attract the attention of the spectators, the employés, the musicians, and the artistes. For all those people, his entry into the theatre would be an event, for his face was one of those that have a notoriety in theatrical circles, which are always well informed of the events transpiring in the Parisian fast world, and, indeed, that evening people talked of nothing but Madame d'Orcival's death. “It will be a real exhibition,” said poor Darcy sadly to himself.

On ascending the grand staircase which leads to the lobby, he looked at the mirrors which had reflected the black and white domino, the steps which poor Julia had tripped over, and he asked himself with anguish if Berthe Lestérel's little feet had passed over them as well. He felt himself giving way little by little by heartrending doubts, and the explanation imagined by his uncle returned to his mind. “Supposing she did enter the ball,” he thought; “supposing she did strike the blow in a fit of anger——”

“Come this way, my dear fellow,” said Nointel to him, taking his arm. “I hear the end of the second act. Let us profit by the occasion to inspect the box-openers before the corridor is overrun. Let us take to the right and look for No. 27, that henceforth legendary box.”

They found it without trouble, and not far from the door which bore the fatal number, they espied a fat woman seated on a stool and dozing amid the noise of the orchestra which accompanied the entrance of Count d'Oberthal, tyrant of Munster, on the stage.

This respectable woman had a pimpled face, a nose the colour of wine dregs, and a cook's hands; but she was dressed in silk like a shop-woman, and retained a majestic attitude, even in her doze. Her triple chin reposed upon a bulky bosom, and her large eyes, partly closed, were fixed vacantly on the carpet, so that to get a view of her face Nointel was obliged to stoop. “We are in luck,” he said to Darcy, in a low voice. “This is an old friend. She will have no secrets from me. You will see.”

He coughed loudly, and the box-opener awoke with a start.

“Good evening, Madame Majoré. Have you slept well?” the captain said to her in his sweetest voice.

“Ah! it's you, Monsieur Nointel,” exclaimed the fat woman. “Excuse me. I did not hear you come. How do you do?”

“Very well; and you, Madame Majoré? And Monsieur Majoré? And Mademoiselle Ismérie? And her sister, Paméla?”

“Monsieur Majoré is as well as the Pont Neuf. He grows younger

since we have the Republic. The little ones are well also. I'm the only one ailing."

"You astonish me; you look superb."

"Lackaday! lackaday! Yesterday, I was still all right; but this evening, I am not worth a copper. Besides, it is easily understood. After the turn I had last night——"

"What turn, Madame Majoré?"

"What! you don't know! Where have you come from, then?"

"Good! I have it, Madame d'Orcival's death. Were you there?"

"I should think I was. Look, there is the unfortunate box. Only to look at the number turns my blood. When I think it was I who opened the door and saw the poor woman dead—and, besides, I have had to go to the Palais de Justice and reply to the investigating magistrate. Why, I ought to be in my bed. Just see, Monsieur Nointel, the manager has no heart, to oblige me to do my duty on a day like this."

"It is really an act of barbarity. The mother of a family has a right to some consideration."

"Oh, certainly, consideration! They know that I am beside myself. Just think, the emotion—the examination. And it is not finished. I have to go again on the day after to-morrow. I applied for leave for myself and the little ones; but the officials laughed in my face, and here I am—and those children, who ought to be with their mother, have to stay on the boards until mid-night. Ismérie is in the *pas des patineurs*, and Paméla figures as a page. No, really, now to see such things, it wasn't worth while changing the government."

"What will you have, Madame Majoré, the manager no doubt thought that the public would lose too much if your charming daughters did not appear in the 'Prophète.' My friend and I came expressly to applaud them."

"You are too amiable, Monsieur Nointel. One can see that you have been a soldier. But in speaking of your friend—it seems to me that I am not mistaken—it is Monsieur Darcy who is with you."

"Gaston Darcy himself, Madame Majoré," said the captain gaily.

"Excuse me, Monsieur Darcy, I didn't recognise you. It is so long since one has had the pleasure of seeing you in the ballet green-room, you who used to be a regular attendant formerly. Without indiscretion, what has become of you for a year past?"

"I have been—very much occupied," stammered Gaston.

"Ah! my God!" exclaimed the box-opener, "I have just remembered, see what it is to have one's head topsy-turvy—yes, indeed, I had forgotten that you were an admirer of Madame d'Orcival. Ah! monsieur, you must be very sorry; and I swear to you if I had foreseen what has happened——"

"Oh! I am quite sure that the poor woman would not be dead," said Nointel earnestly. "I know that you are as courageous as a lioness."

"Yes, sir, as a lioness, I would defend my daughters against a squadron of uhlans."

"I don't doubt it, Madame Majoré. And I have an idea. My friend, Darcy, can't resuscitate Madame d'Orcival, but he hopes that her death will at least be avenged, and he would like to know if the guilty party is really the woman who has been arrested. You ought to be well informed, and perhaps could tell us——"

"Not here, Monsieur Nointel. The act is going to finish, and I have

a great many people in my boxes. At your service elsewhere, however, and as to being well informed, I am, I will answer for it. No one has looked at this affair rightly, neither the commissary, the magistrate, nor the others. The newspapers say foolish things. I am the only one who knows the secret of last night's abomination. I know by whom the blow was dealt."

"What!" exclaimed Gaston, "you are sure that she who is accused——"

"Since I tell you that they don't understand it. The magistrate wouldn't believe me, but one day or another he will realise that I was right. By the way, his name is like yours. Are you related?"

"Yes; but I shall be very grateful to you if you will tell me at once——"

"My dear fellow, you forget that Madame Majoré has duties to perform," interrupted the captain, who saw that Darcy was on the wrong tack. "And then, this is a bad place to chat. There is a way of arranging everything; if Madame Majoré will do us the pleasure of taking supper with us after the performance, with her young ladies——"

"With my daughters! Oh! my dear Monsieur Nointel, you know very well that that cannot be. They are too young, and Monsieur Majoré rides his hobby as regards principles. It is true that this evening there is a great masonic meeting at his lodge of the Friends of Humanity. There is a reception—ordeals, you know—and the fraternal love-feast afterwards. He won't get home till four o'clock in the morning. I know that you are serious gentlemen, and that my daughters would not be compromised. But no, it can't be. It would cause too much talk in the theatre."

"Who would know it? We shouldn't speak about it. Come, my good Madame Majoré, it is agreed. You'll see you won't regret having come, or the young ladies either. I bet that they like truffles."

"Oh! yes, they like them, and they don't often eat them, the poor darlings. They are honest, my dear sir. That isn't like that Zélie, Madame Crochet's daughter, who lives on nothing but asparagus all the winter. If that isn't a pity! I am not afraid of truffles either, and if I was sure——"

"Of our discretion? Come now, Madame Majoré, you know us, the deuce. Look here, so that no one shall suspect anything, we won't set foot in the ballet green-room this evening; and after the performance we will go and wait for you at the corner of the Boulevard Haussmann and the Rue du Helder. That is a spot where no one ever passes."

"Listen, Monsieur Nointel," said the box-opener, assuming a dignified air, "you are making me do something there which Monsieur Majoré would disapprove of; and if it wasn't a question of being useful to your friend who is in trouble—but there is one point on which I won't relent: I won't have it said that my daughters have taken supper with gentlemen in a private room."

"We will take supper wherever you please, Madame Majoré. All is said. I rely on you, at half-past twelve."

The fat woman was, perhaps, about to raise some more virtuous objections, but the act had just finished, and her functions claimed her attention. The captain went away without giving her time to add a single word, and took Gaston with him. "It seems to me," he said to him, "that we are getting along very well. Madame Majoré will put us on the right track."

"I doubt it," sighed Darcy. "She has just admitted that my uncle did not believe her declaration."

"Pooh! I suspect that she badly explained herself, and that she will inform us of matters your uncle knows nothing about. However that may be, we could not neglect so fine an opportunity. The chance of obtaining new information is well worth a supper with two ballet girls and their respectable mamma. Come into the stalls. I don't believe there are many people of our set in the house on a Sunday. Try, however, not to look too sorrowful."

The two friends found seats together in the first row of the stalls, and the captain at once began reviewing the spectators. "Oh! oh!" he said, half aloud, "this is something strange. The Marchioness de Barancos is here."

"What is there extraordinary about the marchioness being here?" asked Darcy, absent-mindedly.

"In the first place, my dear fellow, her usual day is Friday," replied Nointel. "It isn't natural that she should come to the opera house on a Sunday to listen to a performance of the 'Prophète,' which does not constitute what is called a *great attraction* by the English. Next, she must be tired, for she passed the night at this same place, whither she returns this evening to purify herself by a bath of choice music."

"That's true—I had forgotten it—you saw her last night——"

"And I also spoke to her. She doesn't suspect that I recognised her, but I am curious to know if she will recognise me. Yes—perfectly. Ah! she is looking at me through her glasses."

"Where is she?"

"There, quite near us, in her proscenium box, on the ground floor. Don't turn round too quickly. Let me see. Is she alone? Those corner proscenium boxes are as deep as the sea. Real surprise boxes. At all events she is anxious to show herself, for she places herself in front, as though Carolus Duran was here to take her portrait. You do not wonder why she is so desirous of being seen. No? Decidedly, you haven't a mind for comparing facts. As for me, I am certain that she exhibits herself to-night so that it may not be supposed that she was at the ball last night."

"Exhibit herself! to whom? You have just said yourself that there is no one of her circle here."

"Excuse me, there is yourself——"

"She could not have foreseen that I should come."

"And then there is Prébord also. Do you see him, over there at the other end of the stalls? He is twisting himself round to create an effect, and looking at Madame Barancos out of the corners of his eyes. She could very well foresee that he would be here. Ah! she dined in town."

"How do you know that?"

"It is her toilet which tells me so. And her toilet is somewhat of a success. A dress of red faille, secured at the shoulders by diamond buckles, and trimmed with lace."

"Was it in the army that you learned to talk dressmakers' language?"

"My dear fellow, in the 8th Hussars we learned everything. I know how to talk about fashion as well as a society journalist, and cook like a *chef* of the Café Anglais. Only I don't know why Prébord has come. Can there be some appointment on the sly? That must be seen. While waiting, let us take a look at the house. Good! it is just as I thought."

Foreigners of no importance, country folks, people of the middle class, 'irregulars' without rank. Not a face I know. The marchioness will have shown herself for nothing." Nointel paused, and then resumed:

"Ah! the fatal box is empty. That's strange. I should never have believed that the director of the opera house would have deprived himself of the price of a seat for sentimental reasons. After all, maybe your uncle has had a seal put on the door of the famous No. 27. Madame Majoré will inform us while at supper. What a character that solicitous mother is. And what do you say to her scruples in regard to private supper-rooms?"

"I hope very much that we are not going to take supper in public with her and her girls."

"My dear fellow, we shall take supper wherever we can. But, I say, I believe on my word that Madame de Barancos is making signs to you."

The marchioness was, in fact, leaning her elbows on the front of her box, and she looked at Gaston Darcy and worked her fan in a very significant manner. "Still another science I possess," continued the captain. "I acquired it at Havana, where I stayed a week on returning from Mexico. The closed fan brought with a brisk movement towards the bosom, that means, Come. And that ultra-electric telegram is addressed to you, for it certainly isn't intended for me."

"I am going to act as though I had not received the dispatch," murmured Darcy.

"Do you think of doing that? What! you will refuse a chat with Madame de Barancos when we are thirsting for information? That would be absurd, my dear fellow. And I declare to you that I will no longer attend to your affairs if you don't at once transport yourself to that precious marchioness's box."

"But what would you have me say to her?"

"It matters much less what you say to her than what she says to you. And if she calls you, it is evident that she wishes to talk with you. About what? The crime at the opera house, of course. You will be very unfortunate, or very foolish, if you don't derive some profit from a conversation with this madcap who was at the ball when Julia was killed. Come, now, make a bow, at least; bow in reply to that Andalusian smile she sends you over her fan."

Gaston bowed. He could not avoid doing so without being looked upon as an ill-bred man. And the play of the fan recommenced, so plain and so urgent, that it became impossible for Darcy to pretend not to understand it. "Well!" he murmured, "I give in. I will go to the box, since I am obliged to."

"That's the way to talk. You are beginning to listen to reason. Now, one last word of advice before letting you walk about alone. Do you know what you ought to do during your visit?"

"No. What?"

"Make love to Madame de Barancos, my dear fellow."

"Ah! come now, that is too much. Do you think I have a heart for flirting? I wish the devil would fly away with this Célimène from Cuba. Judge if I am disposed to say sweet things to her."

"I hope, at least, that you are not going to her with the look of a man who has been condemned to death. You might just as well tell her that you wish to marry Mademoiselle Lestérel, and that you have constituted yourself her defender," said Nointel, and he added:

"Take it upon yourself to become the Darcy I formerly knew for half-an-hour again, the Darcy who knew how to please women. Be gallant from policy. Would that I could accompany you—I would direct the conversation. But I have never been introduced to the marchioness, and I believe she is less than ever disposed to meet me. She imagines that I don't know whom I gave my arm to last night, and fears that her voice would betray her. You will have to do without me, then. Go, my dear fellow, and be sure and remember everything that issues from the marchioness's mouth. A pretty mouth, upon my word. Go, and bring back your report."

Gaston moved off with somewhat bad grace. He left his place in the stalls, and repaired to the box of the beautiful foreigner. The marchioness was alone. No *cavaliere servente* was hidden in the depths of the proscenium box. The interview was to be a *tête-à-tête*.

This princess of the West Indies was dark like Julia d'Orcival, even darker, for her hair had the bluish reflection of a raven's wing, and her eyes glistened like black diamonds. Her creole skin looked as though it had been gilded by a ray of sunlight, and the Cuban poets had a hundred times compared her red lips to pomegranate blossoms. Her brow was proud and her mouth sensual. And these two features of her handsome face explained the character of this great lady, who braved the world's opinion with unheard-of audacity, and passionately loved those upon whom she fixed her choice.

Gaston had long known her, and in other days had been very much tempted to try to ingratiate himself with her. But he was too much of a Parisian not to avoid violent passions. The marchioness had frightened him.

"You are here at last, sir," she said to him in her low voice, a Castilian voice. "You had to be greatly entreated to come and help me to endure three acts of serious music. But I have you now, and am going to keep you. Sit down there, close by me. I wish to compromise you."

Darcy sought for a polite phrase, which he would have found without the least trouble the night before. But Madame de Barancos did not give him time to envelope his excuses in a compliment. "Imagine to yourself," she continued, "that I have just dined with some Yankees, twenty times millionaires, who dress like porters and eat like savages. I fled at the dessert, and came here to take refuge."

"On Sunday?" said Darcy, who remembered the captain's advice.

"Precisely because it is Sunday. I like to do what other women don't do. Aren't you of opinion that our drawing-room life very much resembles that of a squirrel in a cage? As for me, I escape from it as often as I can, and it will be my dream to see the seamy side of Paris. Some days I have a longing to go and waltz at Mabille."

"This isn't the season. As an eccentricity for winter, I see nothing but a ball at the opera house."

"You call a ball at the opera house an eccentricity? For a worldly Frenchwoman, perhaps. For myself, I should need a more spicy diversion. The fine affair, truly, to come here at midnight masked to the teeth, to immure one's self in a box, or at the most risk a turn in the lobby! That would do very well for some woman of the middle-classes, who has fallen out with her husband. If I decided to do something bold, I should go to the Bullier ball with my face unmasked."

"That would be heroic; and I now understand that to your mind the

ball at the opera house is like one attended by school-girls. Only I suppose that you speak of it, as I could speak of the Falls of Niagara—by hearing."

"How do you know that?"

"You have been there, then?" asked Darcy quickly.

"I admit it," replied the marchioness, without hesitation.

"Last night, perhaps?"

"What does it matter to you, whether it was last night or last year?"

"Forgive me an indiscretion, which, you will admit, that you provoked a little."

"I admit it," said Madame de Barancos, laughing with a frank laugh, which showed her dazzling teeth. "I adore indiscretions. Discreet people weary me. And I can guess why you are anxious to know if I were here last night: it was because you were here yourself."

"That's true; I was here, and I did not see you."

"Ah! So you can't recognise a woman when she is in a domino? By the way, who is that friend whom you have left in the stalls?"

"Henry Nointel, an ex-captain of hussars."

"He is very nice. Why doesn't he come to my house?"

"Why? because you have never done him the honour of inviting him."

"Not at all. It is because I don't please him; for it would have been very easy for him to have been introduced to me through you."

"He goes very little into society. He is a recluse—a bear."

"Really? You give me the desire to tame him. I shall expect you to bring him to me at the next entr'acte."

"I promise it," said Gaston, eagerly, for he began to see the possibility of profiting by the scattered remarks of the capricious creole, and greatly relied on the captain to reach points of interest.

The marchioness had not yet made a single allusion to Madame d'Or-eival's death, and he did not dare to be the first to refer to that tragic event.

"Thanks," replied Madame de Barancos. "But I wish you to remain in my box—at least until the end of the ballet. You will tell me the names of the skaters."

And as Darcy was about to protest: "Not another word. You will prevent me from seeing. I don't know how to look when some one is talking to me."

Darcy did not insist. The curtain rose and the applause of the Sunday audience greeted the effect of snow and fog which so well inaugurates the third act of the "Prophète."

To Darcy's great astonishment, the marchioness became at once absorbed in the contemplation of the marvellous scenery which she must have often admired before, and, without attracting the attention of his beautiful neighbour, he could make a sign to Nointel that all was going well.

Then he began looking at the scene through his glasses, with the sole object of keeping himself in countenance, for the sorrows of Fides did not affect him, and the pretty diversion which precedes the skating exercises had no interest for him. On the other hand, he was struck with astonishment, when, on looking stealthily at Madame de Barancos, he perceived that her eyes were filled with tears. It was certainly not the lively air to which the young dancers were capering which drew tears from her, and he thought he could allow himself a question: "What is the matter, madame?" he asked gently. "Are you suffering?"

"I?—no," murmured the marchioness in a choking voice. Then, recovering herself almost immediately: "You would never divine why I am moved. Would you believe that it is the scene-painter who makes me weep? He has so well imitated the fog—and you don't know that the fog produces a singular effect upon my nerves. It saddens and it delights me. Suppose I were to tell you that it often happens to me to walk out in wet and foggy weather. I experience a strange pleasure in pattering about in the mud of the streets of Paris. I trot about like a *grisette*, expressly to impregnate myself with melancholy—and to cover myself with mud. I am a little crazy, am I not? What is the name of that little girl with the red shoes? You can't imagine how difficult it is to dance with shoes with heels. She is rather thin, but she has some good blood in her. Well, you don't tell me her name?"

"Why I—yes. I think it is—Majoré—or Majorin—or —"

"Why not Majorat?" interrupted Madame de Barancos, laughing merrily. "Your information is not very precise. I thought you were better informed."

"I am very badly informed. It is a very long time since I set foot in the ballet green-room."

"That is true. For a year you have not been free—I had forgotten that," said the marchioness, who had become serious again all at once.

This allusion to Darcy's amours with Julia made him start, and he again put himself on guard. He remembered again that this foreigner had been more or less mixed up in the lugubrious events of the ball at the opera house, and he resolved to press the attack without waiting for the sagacious Nointel to enter the lists. But do what he would to lead the marchioness to the interesting subject, he could draw nothing from her. She started off into droll criticisms of the acting and singing; she mocked at the Anabaptists striking fire; at the saving of Berthe dragged from the waves of the Meuse; at the sun which rose very badly over Munster; and when the Prophet began singing the magnificent hymn, "King of heaven, the angels' Lord," she turned her back upon him, saying abruptly to Darcy:

"I adore Meyerbeer's music; but this evening it irritates me. I should like to hear one of Offenbach's quadrilles. Go and bring me your friend, the captain."

Gaston judged that he would not succeed alone in bringing Madame de Barancos to the course he wished her to follow, so he did not wait more begging to go for reinforcements. He left the box, promising to return with the captain, whom the impetuous creole asked for with such persistence; and he did not have to go far to find him, for he met him in the passage. "Well?" asked Nointel.

"Well," replied Gaston, "I don't understand that woman at all. She breaks out into peals of laughter, and the next minute she is in tears. She mocks at the women of the middle-classes who venture to attend an opera ball, and speaks of dancing at Mabilles as of something quite innocent. I really think that she is crazy."

"Crazy, no. It is in the blood. Savoy and its duke are full of precipices, said Ruy Blas. Havanese marchionesses are full of changes. But what did she say to you about the murder?"

"Nothing. She made a very roundabout allusion to my relations with Julia, and that was all. I am convinced, however, that she knows much more than I thought about the events of last night."

"I am also convinced of it, and I am very much afraid that you managed very badly in your endeavours to draw some disclosures from her."

"I have done my best; but if you think it easy, you are greatly deceived. You manœuvre in a way to draw her into a trap in conversation; she allows herself to be led on; and just as you think you have her, she escapes by asking the name of some dancer in red shoes."

"Yes, she is wavering and changeable; but I understand these weather-cock natures. There is a way in fixing them in one direction. I bet that you forgot my recommendations; that you did not set yourself up as an adorer."

"No; that's certain. The task was beyond my powers, and in addition to that, if I had taken it into my head to make love to her, she would have laughed in my face."

"Prébord does it very well with her, and very earnestly too, I will answer for that."

"Prébord is a fool who is of no account. Madame de Barancos tolerates his assiduities because he passes, I do not know why, for a fashionable man—perhaps because he attends all the first performances, and is mentioned in the papers. Foreign ladies adore bluster. I am not Prébord, however, and the marchioness would have considered my declarations ridiculous, especially on the day after Julia's death."

"I am not of your opinion; but since you absolutely refuse to play the lover, let us talk no more about it. Tell me if you think she remembers my face."

"She remembers it so well that she thinks a great deal about you. She asked me who you were, and when she knew that we were intimately acquainted, she reproached me for not having taken you to her house before now."

"And you answered her?"

"That you were not fond of society; that you even eluded it. At which she insisted, and I was obliged to promise her that I would introduce you."

"When?"

"At once. She is awaiting you. I have come in search of you on her behalf."

And as Nointel reflected, Darcy added, with a slightly ironical intention: "This is an excellent opportunity for you yourself to do what you advised me to attempt. Madame de Barancos' heart is to be taken. Forward to the attack!"

"I am not loath," said the captain, quietly. "But it will be solely to oblige you, for I have no taste for fly-away eccentrics. I love gentle women; those who are unaffected and even a little senseless. No matter; I will devote myself if it is necessary. It remains to be seen whether this marchioness will not soon put an end to my gallantries. I have seen fifteen years of service, my dear fellow."

To look at him, one would not have suspected it. He was tall and slender in figure, with broad shoulders, elegantly framed; of dark complexion, with sparkling eyes, superb teeth, a full complement of hair, and that manly look which women appreciate so much. A great distinction of manner completed all these physical advantages. In a word, Nointel had everything necessary to please woman, and even something more—a clear intellect, decision of character, wherewith to lord over "irregulars,"

and inspire even indifferent beauties with passion. If he had deigned to seek conquests, he could have made them by the dozen. But this accomplished cavalier was also a practical philosopher, a sage who knew the worth of worldly successes, and who contented himself with quiet "good fortunes." He loved after his own fashion, without fuss and without tempests.

"It is precisely because you don't care for Madame de Barancos that you have a great chance of being admired by her," said Darcy, who was not lacking in experience in these matters. "Come and try and be more skilful than I was. One last piece of information before entering. The marchioness declared to me frankly enough that she has attended an opera ball. She did not say that it was yesterday, but——"

"But I am sure that it was yesterday, and I am also sure that if she is anxious to talk with me this evening, it is especially to try me. She wishes to know if I have the least suspicion of having given her my arm last night in the corridor of the first tier. I am at least her equal, and I don't fear her. I shall study her game and will not divulge my own. She must be getting impatient. Take me to her box."

This chat had brought the two friends to the end of the passage, and had been prolonged longer than it should have been.

When they presented themselves before Madame de Barancos, they found Prébord installed in the box. The coxcomb had taken care to place himself well in sight, leaning forward affectedly, with the evident object of making the two thousand spectators believe that he was on the best possible terms with the marchioness. The meeting was an unpleasant one, and Darcy was about to beat a retreat, after having excused himself, but Madame de Barancos did not understand it so.

"Thanks for your gracious visit, dear sir," she said to Prébord in a dry tone. "I shall, no doubt, see you next week at the ball which the Smithsons intend to give."

This little speech was a formal dismissal, and the insipid dandy did not misunderstand it. He rose much against his will, saluted the new comers with an air of annoyance, and bowed to Madame de Barancos while saying:—"I shall be very happy to meet you there, Madame the Marchioness, and to bring you the information you have been pleased to ask of me concerning that singer who assassinated Julia d'Orcival."

Such was the Parthian dart which Prébord aimed at Gaston on yielding him his place, and the arrow wounded Berthe's lover cruelly, so cruelly indeed, that he almost retorted with a violent remark. Nointel calmed him with a glance, however, and the perfidious enemy who had struck him so treacherously hastened to take his leave.

Madame de Barancos had divined that the person of the dark Don Juan was not agreeable to the two friends, and she had pitilessly sacrificed him. "Did you hear how I cut him?" she said. "Would you believe it, that pretty gentleman ventured to intrude here, under the pretext of telling me about the arrest of a poor girl who came to my house to sing sometimes during the winter. Such impudence is intolerable, and I was about to show him the door when you arrived."

Then seeing that Darcy and Nointel remained in the required attitude of two visitors, one of whom wishes to present the other, she continued: "That's useless. I have a horror of conventional forms. Why should you introduce Captain Nointel to me since you have just told me all the good you thought of him? And why should Monsieur Nointel feel

himself obliged to bow to me with a flourish of the arms and mumble a complimentary phrase, since it is I who begged you to bring him to me. You should leave those doings to Monsieur Prébord. Take his place and let us chat."

The captain was a little nonplussed. He found himself almost in the position of an orator who has prepared an exordium but whom an incident disturbs just as he commences. Madame de Barancos spoilt his effects, just as she had cut the importunate dandy she had driven away.

He recovered himself, however, quickly enough, and said gaily: "You overwhelm me with delight, madame, I detest preliminaries, preambles, prefaces ----"

"And Prébords, don't you?" interrupted the marchioness. "That man is insufferable."

"And he thinks himself ineffable. You receive him, according to what he says."

"Yes, I receive everybody, but I have only very few friends, and Monsieur Prébord will never be one of them. A coxcomb who strikes attitudes and listens to himself talking! Doesn't he belong to your club? Then you must know him."

"A great deal too well."

"Is it true that he boasts that he is courting me?"

"He is quite capable of doing so."

"Very well, sir, I beg of you to declare it aloud, and in every direction that I have never encouraged him, and that for two reasons—in the first place, because he does not please me; and next, because I detest men who trouble themselves about me. Don't you think that word *courting* is odious? Court! I still see the fools who paraded before me on reception days, when my husband was governor of Cuba—I can see their insipid smiles and hear their commonplace compliments. No, the man whom I shall love will not resemble these cringing idiots; the man whom I shall love will not humiliate himself before me. He will be proud, and won't come and offer his love to me as one offers a bouquet. He will wait till I ask him for it. I don't wish to be chosen; I wish to choose."

"And if you should choose badly?"

"I should suffer, but what would it matter? Happiness does not consist in being loved—it is to love."

"And so," said the captain, looking steadily at the marchioness, "if you were to love a man, and that man loved you, you would not wait for him to tell you so?"

"No," answered Madame de Barancos, without lowering her eyes.

"Madame," said Nointel, laughing, "I am obliged to confess that if by any possibility a woman should make me a declaration, my first impulse would be to sneak away. I am very much inclined to contradictions, and have no taste for easy victories."

There was a short silence. Madame de Barancos was playing with her fan. She opened it with a nervous jerk, and closed it sharply. No other sound was to be heard in the box but this rustle, which resembled the noise made by the wings of a partridge suddenly rising at the sportsman's feet.

"That Prébord must be a coward," said the marchioness all at once. "Without my having asked him he began relating the misfortune which has befallen that unfortunate girl who is accused. He seemed to take extreme pleasure in it; and he had none but words of contempt for the

dead—Forgive me," she continued, extending her hand to Darcy. "I have wounded you without intending to do so. I had forgotten that you were intimate with Madame d'Orcival. But I swear to you that I am sorry for her, although I have no reason to regret her. And I pity you, if you loved her. But no—you did not love her—you would not be here this evening."

Gasten, who was greatly troubled, sought for a reply which he did not find, and Madame de Barancos assumed another tone to say to Nointel: "It is a strange story, that of this death. What do you think of it, sir? You were, no doubt, at the ball last night?"

"Yes, madame, I was there," replied the captain. "I even met and recognised——"

"Who?" asked Madame de Barancos, ready to rear up.

"That poor Julia d'Orcival, just as she was ascending the grand staircase. A little later on, I again saw her at a distance in her box, and I did not in the least imagine that she would only leave it dead. I know nothing more than yourself about what occurred afterwards, but General Simancas could inform you. He remained the whole time in the next box."

"Who is this General Simancas?"

"What! you don't know him! We have just dined with him, and he assured us that he had had the honour of seeing you this very day. He is a Peruvian general."

"Yes—yes—perfectly. Where is my memory? I forget the names of my oldest friends. I have known Monsieur Simancas for several years, and I, in fact, received him to-day; but he is no better informed than you—he wasn't able to tell me if this girl Lestérel were guilty. Lestérel is her name; is it not?" And, without leaving Nointel time to reply: "Ah! they are commencing. How tiresome! We can no longer chat. This fourth act is admirable—but I never could endure it. The march is too solemn for me. I don't like solemn things. And when John of Leyden advances with measured steps under the dais, it always seems to me as though I see the Marquis de Barancos making his official entry into the cathedral of Havana on Corpus Christi day. But you, gentlemen, you no doubt came here for the music?"

"Oh, solely for that," said the captain, earnestly.

"I won't prevent you from listening to it, then. As for me, I am going home. I now retire at eleven o'clock. And this morning, at nine, I had already made the round of the Bois at a gallop. My footman ought to be in the corridor. Be kind enough to tell him as you pass by to have my clarence brought to the door. In the evening I go out only in the clarence. It is heavy and ugly, but those young ladies haven't one like it."

Nointel and Darcy were already on their feet.

"We shall see each other soon again, I hope," continued the marchioness.

"Are you a sportsman, sir?"

The question was addressed to the captain, who merely replied: "Yes, madame."

"Then, you will do me the pleasure of coming to shoot at my château at Sandouville. My estate has this advantage, that a deal of game is still to be found there at the latter end of the season, and my keepers are preparing a grand *battue*. I will write to you as soon as the day is determined upon, and I shall confidently rely on both of you, gentlemen."

The invitation this time was collective; but Darcy excused himself, and his refusal did not seem to displease Madame de Barancos. Nointel accepted without too much eagerness, and took his leave at the same time as his friend. He did not care to remain. He had learned enough. His plan of campaign was already formed.

"My dear fellow, my mind is made up," said the captain to his friend, after transmitting the order to the footman. "You don't care, I suppose, to see the King of the Anabaptists crowned. Come into the lounge, then, we can chat there at our pleasure."

Darcy allowed himself to be led away, and soon the two allies were seated on a divan under the ceiling painted by Baudry.

"My mind is also made up," began Gastou. "This woman, Barancos, is crazy about you; and she does not hide her feelings. She has thrown herself at your head with incredible impudence."

"A matter of climate. She was born in the tropics. A woman of the temperate zone would assuredly have been more ceremonious; but that isn't the matter in question. Did you notice, my dear friend, that she had forgotten Simancas' name?"

"Yes, certainly, and I concluded from that that Simancas had been bragging. She scarcely knows him."

"I go a great deal further, and conclude that the marchioness entered Julia d'Orcival's box last night, that the Peruvian saw and recognised her there, and that he lost no time in profiting by his discovery. He went straight to the lady's residence, and threatened to ruin her if she did not accept the bargain he proposed to her. He, no doubt, demanded a good price, and, in addition, required that Madame de Barancos should habitually receive him. He is anxious to hold a good position in society, the cunning rascal."

"Yes, that is certainly what happened," said Darcy; "and if, as I no longer doubt, this woman is the domino who had an interview with Julia, it is she who killed her. It only remains for me to denounce her to my uncle. Mademoiselle Lestérel is saved."

"You run on much too fast. In the first place, even if you proved that the marchioness entered the box, it would still be necessary to prove that she struck the blow. Now, I don't believe she ever owned a Japanese poniard. Curiosities of that kind are not used by great ladies. On the other hand, I remember very well that at the time I offered her my arm she held a fan in her hand which did not come from Yeddo, I will answer for that. A Spanish lady goes nowhere without a fan; but ordinarily she carries only one. So the instrument of the crime did not belong to her."

"How do you know that? She might have found it, have hidden it under her domino. I repeat to you that it is necessary that I should see my uncle as soon as possible. He has certainly not yet retired for the night, and I am going——"

"To tell him what? That Simancas knows a great deal about the doings of Madame de Barancos? Very well. Your uncle will have him summoned. Simancas will deny it. Simancas will protest that the marchioness is the most virtuous woman in all Spain. How would Monsieur Roger Darcy operate to convict him of testifying falsely? Put him to torture? I see no other means but that—and then—this Peruvian is an old fox who would allow himself to be roasted rather than lose the fruits of his villany. Would Monsieur Roger Darcy open an investi-

gation against the lady herself on such a vague charge? I doubt it very much, and if he took it into his head to do so, you may well believe that Madame de Barancos would find no trouble in proving that she did not leave her palace in the Rue de Monceau last night. She has ten ways of leaving it and returning without being seen. And this morning at eight o'clock she was on horseback in the Bois de Boulogne."

"She will defend herself, of course. All the same, I ought to inform my uncle of what we have just learned."

"Such isn't my opinion."

"What! you wish me to be silent when an opportunity offers itself to prove Mademoiselle Lestérel's innocence?"

"It isn't yet time to speak."

"When will it be time, then? Ought I to wait till Berthe has been tried—condemned?"

"It will suffice to wait till I am a little further advanced in the marchioness' intimacy."

Darcy gave a start, and said slowly: "Then, if you were her lover, and she should make an avowal of her crime, you would denounce her?"

"Do you believe me capable of such villany as that?"

"Certainly not. But what then do you propose doing? I no longer understand."

"In the first place, I don't wish Madame de Barancos for a mistress. That crazy woman has nothing about her that pleases me. I do not care a fig for her millions and her marquisate. Her beauty does not tempt me, and her pranks weary me. If the faucy took her to offer her heart to me, I should refuse it flatly, and still more her hand. When a man has commanded the 3rd squadron of the 8th Hussars, he doesn't marry a suspected woman——"

"Forgive me, I did not wish to wound you, you know that very well."

"Then I return to my project. I wish merely to visit the lady, hunt, dine and waltz with her, study her relations with Simancas, and when I am sure of my facts inform you of all I know. You will then do all you think it your duty to do. My part will be ended. But if you wish me to serve you, for God's sake don't go smashing the windows. The marchioness would close her door to us, and only the excellent Madame Majoré would remain. I rely very much on Madame Majoré, but two sources of information are worth more than one, and I earnestly beg of you to remain quiet until otherwise advised by me."

"You are perhaps right," said Darcy after reflecting a little while.

"It is possible that in the present condition of affairs my uncle would refuse to open an investigation against the marchioness. He would ask me from what motive she had killed Julia, and, in truth, I should not know what to answer him. A great lady does not kill a fast woman because she has handsomer carriages than her own."

"No; but on that point I return to my first idea—that which I revealed to Simancas during the dinner. Goly mine was mixed up in it."

"You think, then, that he had been Madame de Barancos' lover?"

"I think so—especially since I know her. In the first place it was formerly rumoured so. She received him very much. That wasn't natural, and it created talk. And then, my dear fellow, Poles like Goly mine are made for Havanases like Madame de Barancos. This crazy woman would naturally fall in love with a madman, and not be backward about telling him so. You have just heard her declaration of principles.

And she, no doubt, suddenly left him at the close of some violent scene. I bet that she regretted him after his death, and that she bore him no little ill will for having hanged himself for another."

"If she was his mistress, the crime explains itself," said Gaston, following his train of thought. "Golymine may have kept some letters, deposited them at Julia's—"

"Who wrote to the marchioness, offering to return them or sell them to her, at the ball at the opera house. That is very admissible. It now remains to find out if we are not mistaken. We shall have to commence by questioning Julia's maid. It is possible that Julia entrusted her with a letter to post, and even that she told her what she was going to do at the ball."

"Mariette, the maid, will come to my house to-morrow. She states that she knows the guilty party, and has promised to name her to me."

"Hum! your uncle has already listened to her, I believe, and yet he sent Mademoiselle Lestérel to prison. No matter, we will question this maid, I say we, because I shall come and ask breakfast of you to-morrow morning."

"I rely on that. Without you I should do no good. I have lost my self possession," said Darcy, sadly. Then reconsidering what he said: "There is, however, one thing which I will do alone, and that will be to punish Prébord."

"I would willingly aid you in that—you could slap one cheek, I the other. But it isn't the custom. So you will take charge of the affair yourself. One word of advice, however. Postpone the operation for a couple of weeks. Just now you have enough business on hand. Matters mustn't be complicated by a duel. A little later on, when the right time comes, I will charge myself with arranging a nice quarrel between you and that pretty fellow, a quarrel under a well-chosen pretext. I will be your second, and you shall kill him like a dog—that is if he consents to fight, for I do not think he is very plucky. He hasn't forgotten the scene in the Rue Royale. The words he made use of on taking leave of the marchioness, those venomous words, were evidently for your benefit, and he must suspect that you are interesting yourself in the accused party much more than you wish to appear. An additional reason, my dear fellow, for redoubled vigilance. Be very watchful of yourself, especially before our friends at the club. They all have their ears on the alert and their tongues loosened."

"I shall see them as little as possible."

"Agreed, but you will see them occasionally. Be as impassible as an old diplomat, even although you may hear the most atrocious calumnies repeated about Mademoiselle Lestérel. But see the fourth act is finished. The fifth is very short. Let us go and take a turn on the boulevard while awaiting our precious appointment."

"Then you persist in wishing to take supper with this box-opener?"

"Do I persist? Why, I wouldn't give up this little festival for six months' pay as a captain. It is true that it wasn't much, and that I no longer receive it. Come! come! Madame Majoré would never forgive your absence, and it won't do for you to lose her good graces, for you have need of her."

Gaston submitted. He began to appreciate the efficacy of the captain's measures, and he no longer had so strong a dislike of following him in the varied excursions he projected.

The two friends went out together and crossed the Place de l'Opéra in the soft glow of the electric light. It was the hour when pedestrians become fewer on the boulevards—the time of night when prudent people go home, and when noctambulists of both sexes saunter dismally from the Madeleine to the Faubourg Montmartre while awaiting the time for a problematical supper.

Darcy looked upon the scene without evincing any interest, but the captain, whose mind was free, noticed everything. On passing in front of the Café Tortoni, he plainly saw the marchioness's clarence standing at the entrance in the Rue Taitbout, and, where she could be seen by all, the marchioness herself taking ices with Simancas and Saint-Galmier.

"Oh, oh!" he said, pressing Gaston's arm tightly, "I am not sorry to have come thus far. Madame de Barancos sitting at table with the Peruvian and Canadian in one of the most frequented public resorts of Paris; that is significant, I hope. Yesterday she certainly wouldn't have shown herself in such bad company. Simancas must have a good hold upon her, for her to consent to honour him like that. Where the deuce can he have met her? Ah, I have it. This woman, who pretends that she retires at eleven o'clock, had herself brought in front of Tortoni's to take a sherbet in her carriage. It is Havanese style to take a sherbet in a carriage. Simancas, not having found any whist-players at the club, was sauntering in the neighbourhood. He perceived the lady and exacted of her that she should exhibit herself by entering the place with him. He also profited by the occasion to present his faithful Saint-Galmier. You will see that the marchioness will have a nervous attack to-morrow, and that the good doctor will treat her with his dietetic system. They are now raised in the world's opinion and washed of the evil rumours which have circulated to their discredit. These fellows are decidedly very able."

"Yes," murmured Gaston, "and I fear they may put sticks between the spokes of our wheels. Madame de Barancos is perhaps talking about us to them at this moment."

"This is not very probable, for one reason."

"What is that?"

"For the reason that she has fixed her choice on your friend. Women never talk of the men whom they are disposed to love. It is even the only case in which they are discreet. They keep their own secrets very well and those of others very badly. But I am amusing myself with giving you a course in feminine psychology, and am setting myself up as a conqueror, like Monsieur Prébord. It is both ridiculous and untimely. Let us retrace our steps. It is at least useless for the marchioness to know that she has been seen by us. Besides the audience is leaving the Vaudeville. The 'Prophète' must be finished. Leyden has just been burnt with his women like Sardanapalus; but Ismérie and Paméla will have extricated themselves from the hubbub, and their venerable mother will be cross if we make them wait. Let us go and take our position at the corner of the Boulevard Haussmann and the Rue du Helder. No one will disturb us, I will guarantee that."

Five minutes later, Berthe's two defenders were at their posts. They did not wait long. Madame Majoré appeared in the distance, flanked by her two daughters, one tall and thin, and the other short and fat. You would have said a pumpkin between a stalk of asparagus and an apple.

Nointel gallantly went forward to meet this interesting family, and

Darcy was obliged to follow him. "Again good evening, dear madame, said the amiable captain. "You don't know the pleasure you give us; and I must thank your charming daughters for having been willing to come——"

"Ah! of course, they asked no better," exclaimed Madame Majoré. "It is I who did not wish to—but they would have had a fit of sickness over it. So that decided me, for I, you see, Monsieur Nointel, I am a mother before all. I would bleed for my children, like the white pelican. Well, all the same, I have some remorse. When I think that Monsieur Majoré is arrayed in his insignia, and that he is perhaps delivering a discourse on morality at the time when his wife and daughters——"

"But our supper will be moral, my dear Madame Majoré; everything that is most moral. That is to say, it won't even be a supper—it will be a love-feast, like the affair at the lodge of the Friends of Humanity."

"Ah! well, no, that would be stupid," said Mademoiselle Ismérie between her teeth.

"Will you be quiet, you big fool!" exclaimed Madame Majoré. "What kind of manners are those? Your father has never accustomed you to such behaviour."

"Fear nothing, mademoiselle, there will be no discourse," continued the captain.

"Will there be some chocolate-cream for dessert?" asked little Paméla.

"There will be everything you wish, my child. It only remains to be known where your mother desires to take supper. The Café Anglais is no longer open at night-time, since the—excuse me, Madame Majoré—since some years, but there is Bignon's, the Maison Dorée, the Café de la Paix, the Café Riche——"

"I say, M'sieu Nointel, will you make us happy, my sister and I?" interrupted the tall Ismérie. "Yes! Very well, take us to the Café Américain."

"Mademoiselle," replied Nointel earnestly, "we are here only to give you pleasure. Off for the Café Américain—if your mother sees no objection."

Darcy saw a great deal to object to, and he nudged his friend with his elbow to warn him that this choice did not suit him at all. But the captain continued without noticing him: "What do you say to that, Madame Majoré?"

"I!" exclaimed the box-opener. "What would you have me say, my dear sir? I don't know that neighbourhood. I was once an *artiste*, all the same. I acted in comedy, and, without boasting, I can say that I had prospects. Well, in my time, we merely took supper at the café of the theatre, with a little sour-kraut and a mug of beer."

"That was very appropriate," murmured the tall Ismérie.

"Mamma," said Paméla, "the Café Américain is a very proper place. Madame Roquillon's girl—you know, the one who is a page with me in the act of the conflagration—well, she went there on leaving the first performance of 'Yedda,' and she told me again this evening that only stylish gentlemen went there."

"Well, now, that is a guarantee!" said the mamma. "A fine lot she knows, that little Roquillon! She is always at the Reine-Blanche and the Elysée-Montmartre ball. I even forbade you to associate with her. As for me, I know but one thing. The question is if your Café Américain is

a restaurant where a mother can take her daughters. And on that point I refer myself to Monsieur Nointel."

"My dear Madame Majoré," said the captain with charming good nature, "I will not go quite so far as Mademoiselle Roquillon. I won't state that ill-mannered young men and bad company don't sometimes slip into that establishment; but it is the same everywhere, and I think these young ladies will run no risk. Besides, nothing obliges us to take supper in the large room on the first floor. There are private rooms on the *entresol*. One is there at home, and——"

"A private room, never! That is contrary to my principles. A young person who takes supper in a private room is ruined."

"It was perhaps true years ago; but at present I swear to you that——"

"No, no! none of that, Monsieur Nointel. Alfred would never forgive me for having compromised his daughters. Alfred, that's Monsieur Majoré, and there, it is as true as I tell you, he doesn't trifle with morality."

"Then you think he would permit them to take supper among a hundred people of both sexes?"

"He wouldn't permit it, but he would tolerate it perhaps; whereas, if he knew——"

"I shouldn't care if papa did know it," said Ismérie, half aloud; "but it will be ever so much more fun to take supper before everybody. At least, if we drink champagne, the women in the room will see that we have been treated."

"And, then, we can look at the toilets," added Paméla. "Caroline Roquillon told me that there were some stunning ones."

"It is understood, young ladies," the captain hastened to say, "we all agree to take supper in public."

"That doesn't seem to amuse Monsieur Darcy much," continued the tall Ismérie. "Why is it that you are no longer seen in the green-room, M'sieu Darcy? You don't wish to speak to me, I suppose, as you didn't bid me good evening just now."

"Upon my word, mademoiselle, I am very absent-minded," stammered Gaston, who was much enraged.

"Oh! and, then, you have had some trouble," exclaimed Paméla.

"Well, that's understood. To lose a friend when one has known her for a year——"

"Will you be quiet, you blind magpie!" said Madame Majoré. "Is it any of your business if Monsieur Darcy has any trouble? And you, Ismérie, try and behave yourself during supper. No eyes for gentlemen you don't know—like the evening I took you to the concert of the Eldorado—or else you will have a good box on the ear. Now that I have stated my conditions, be off, you bad set. These gentlemen will show us the way. And you, young ladies, no antics. Excuse me, Monsieur Nointel, if I don't take your arm. I am a mother first of all. Ah! when a woman has two daughters in the ballet, she has any amount of annoyance."

"I understand your maternal solicitude, and approve of it, dear madame," replied Nointel, seriously. "The restaurant is close by. We will precede you a few steps during the walk, and will await you on the stairs."

He took Darcy with him, and the box-opener followed them, flanked by the two young ladies who, by her orders, kept close to her.

Gaston profited by the *tête-à-tête* to make a scene with his friend. "This is too much," he said to him. "You must have sworn to exasperate me? To take supper in public with this matron and her daughters, is the height of impropriety and ridiculousness."

"Perhaps so," replied Nointel, without getting excited; "but it would be the height of foolishness not to do what is necessary to get all we can out of the box-opener of No. 27. I should have much preferred not to have shown myself with these young girls in plaid tartans, and this mother whom one could exhibit for money at the fair at Saint-Cloud. But we have no choice. I had hoped that the little ones would be for the private room; but not at all, they are for taking supper in public. They, perhaps, hope to see some of their lovers who are neither admitted to the green-room of the ballet or to the family residence of that M. Majoré, who is so severe a man as regards principles. So much the better if they meet the fellows they prefer. They will occupy themselves with exchanging glances with them, and will bother us much less. Don't you trouble yourself about anything. I will make the mother talk. And don't worry yourself about the public. We shall find there more foreigners than Frenchmen, and very probably none of our set. Perhaps some young ladies who know us by sight, but they will believe that we are in search of conquests, and won't dare to come and meddle with the Majoré family. Come, my dear Gaston, resign yourself. Think that this corpulent creature may perhaps give us the solution of the enigma. In any case, she must be able to tell us something new. But here we are. To our posts now."

It was cold, and no one was seated in the niches outside the Café Américain. The passers-by walked on rapidly with the collars of their overcoats turned up to their ears. Five or six night cabmen alone stamped their feet upon the sidewalk. Madame Majoré and her daughters arrived without molestation at the foot of the stairs where they were awaited. Who would have taken a notion to notice them? Young ladies of the ballet don't pride themselves on dressing to go to dance; and on leaving the theatre the butterflies change again to chrysalides. To perceive the tips of their wings, it is necessary to have a Parisian's eye, and on Sundays more country people than habitués are met in this neighbourhood.

"Here we are," panted Madame Majoré, who experienced great difficulty of locomotion, owing to her corpulence. "The house has a good appearance, and it seems to me that a mother of a family who respects herself can enter it."

"Assuredly, dear madame," replied the captain, with a perfectly serious manner. "If it had been otherwise, I shouldn't have brought you here, however desirous I might be to please your charming daughters. Will you please come up stairs?"

"What! is it necessary to go up stairs? Ah, Monsieur Nointel, I see what you are aiming at! You wish to take us to a private room."

"I swear to you that I don't. The rooms where supper is served are on the next floor. On the lower floor, in there, to your right, only English and American drinks are served—mint juleps, eggs beaten in rum and sugar——"

"Juleps! Thanks! I am not ill! Let us go up, since it is necessary to do so. Pass in front, young ladies; Monsieur Nointel will have the goodness to give me his arm."

"I was about to offer it," replied Nointel, gallantly.

And he began towing the fat box-opener up stairs without the least

hesitation, without laughing at the figure he would cut on entering the restaurant. When a man has charged a Prussian battery at Champigny at the head of a squadron of hussars, he has fear of nothing.

Ismérie and Paméla climbed the stairs so nimbly that Madame Majoré shouted out to them at each step: "Too fast, young ladies; you are not on the boards here, and I don't wish to lose you from sight. Not so fast, or I will take you home to bed without supper. Ah! those young folks, captain, if one hadn't an eye upon them—but after all, between you and me, I don't blame them. At their age; my faith! I was just the same."

They at last reached the entrance of a passage where there were several doors, from behind some of which there came the sound of clinking glasses and songs sung out of tune.

"Here are the famous private rooms," said Nointel. "You see, dear madame, that we don't stop here. One more flight, if you please."

"They are having fine fun in there," said Ismérie, who seemed to have taken root on the landing.

"Zélie Crochet told me that it was all hung with silk damask," retorted little Paméla.

"Will you do me the pleasure not to remain standing there like ninnyies?" shouted Madame Majoré.

The waiters looked at them with amazement, and Darcy, who was in the position of file-closer, pulled his hat down over his eyes so that the butler should not recognise him. The captain remained impassible, and his serenity did not give way even when it was necessary for him to cross the threshold of the large room which occupies nearly the whole front on the boulevard. It was not yet one o'clock, and there were not very many people there. A few noisy Brazilians, a few silent Yankees, two or three Englishmen of the drinking class, a party of lawyers' clerks in a merry mood, and a dozen women, those who come every evening and change tables more than once between midnight and dawn.

Nointel glanced at Darcy with a look which signified: You see that we fall well. All these people are perfectly indifferent to me. And he conducted Madame Majoré to the farthest side of the room, into a corner which was vacant and which seemed appropriate for his purpose.

"That is very well arranged," said the fat woman, "but one doesn't know what may happen! We will put my two daughters between you and me, my dear sir. In that way I shall be as easy as though Monsieur Majoré was here."

"And you would have reason to be," exclaimed the captain; "but you can have full confidence in my friend Darcy, as well as in myself; and I protest against an arrangement which would deprive me of the pleasure of chatting with you. I must ask that these young ladies place themselves in the middle. Darcy beside Mademoiselle Ismérie, Mademoiselle Paméla between you and her sister, and your servant opposite you, dear madame."

"Oh! but I shall be much flattered to have you opposite me. And then," added the box-opener, leaning forward to whisper in Nointel's ear, "I have so many things to tell you—some things which my daughters need not hear, and which would perhaps hurt Monsieur Darcy. When a man has known a person as he knew Madame d'Orceval——"

"That is true. We will have some words aside. Now will you permit me to order the supper. Young ladies, do you leave it to me?"

"Yes, provided there are some truffles," said Ismérie.

"And some crawfish in the Bordeaux style," added the little sister, timidly.

"There shall be some. There is everything here. Seat these ladies, Darcy. I will go and confer with the proper party in regard to the bill of fare."

Nointel had greatly frequented the Café Américain formerly; he was still known there, and wished to take his precautions against troublesome neighbours who might drop in. The intelligent landlord took in the situation at a glance, and perfectly understood the request of the captain, who begged him, as far as possible, to reserve the tables nearest to that at Madame Majoré was already seated. At present they were vacant, and it was possible to talk without being overheard.

Darcy formed the weak side of the dispositions taken by Nointel. He should have occupied himself with Ismérie and even with Paméla also, while his friend engrossed the attention of their mother, and tried to extract some useful information from her. But Darcy did not appear at all disposed to make these young persons talk. Fortunately, they were as talkative as two parroquets, and did not refrain from tormenting him with questions, at the same time picking prawns or sipping sherry.

"I say, are those real diamonds which that gentleman over there wears for waistcoat buttons?" asked Paméla of him. "I wouldn't have him however, if he gave his buttons to me. He resembles the orang-outang in the Jardin des Plantes."

And Ismérie added: "She is Spanish, isn't she, that lady with whom you were in the proscenium box? She did have a dress! One would do anything foolish to have one like that. It is said that she has an income of six hundred thousand francs. How much would that be to squander a day, an income of six hundred thousand francs?"

And Darcy was obliged to answer them. The captain who encouraged him with a look, seized hold of the opportunity to attack Madame Majoré. She did not like prawns, but she adored Spanish wines, and was already at her third glass of sherry, when Nointel said to her in a low tone of voice: "You must feel the need of recovering yourself after your emotions of the other night."

"Don't speak of it," replied the fat woman in the same tone. "I ought to be in my bed, but I can refuse nothing to my friends, and you are so anxious to know the secret of the affair."

"I shall be infinitely obliged to you for it, my dear Madame Majoré. Then you know this secret?"

"Oh! as to that, yes. I can very well boast that, if they had been willing to listen to me, they wouldn't have been so foolish as to arrest that demoiselle La Grenelle—La Bretelle—I forget her name. I want to ask you if that arrest was sensible—an *artiste*—not of the ballet, it's true—but no matter."

"You think, then, that it was not she who committed the crime?"

"I think she is innocent as a child just born. That isn't a woman's doing, Monsieur Nointel. It is a man's doings, and I know the scamp who did it. I have seen him. I have spoken to him."

"Take care, Monsieur Darcy," exclaimed Ismérie, "you are spilling some wine on my dress."

"I will buy you another, mademoiselle," said Gaston, without looking at his neighbour.

Madame Majoré had not spoken sufficiently low, and he had just heard her state that Julia had been killed by a man.

"You stupefy me, my dear madame," said the captain. "From what I have been told, there is no man in the affair. It was certainly a woman who entered the box."

"Yes; what does that prove?"

"And in the next box there were but two gentlemen, whom I know."

"I know them, too. General Simancas and Dr. Saint-Galmier. Two subscribers. Very nice people."

"Then I can't make it out, my good Madame Majoré. Have the goodness to explain to me——"

"Here it is, captain. Imagine to yourself that just at a quarter-past twelve Madame d'Orcival arrived in a black and white domino—a strange idea, all the same—that didn't bring her good luck—I knew it was she, but I acted as though I didn't; so she commenced by giving me two louis, and said to me: 'I am expecting some ladies. You will let no one enter but them. No gentlemen, you understand. If you execute my order well, you shall have three more louis—that will make five.'"

"She said some ladies?" asked Nointel quickly.

"Some ladies or some dominos, I no longer remember. That does not change things."

"She did not say one lady?"

"No, for sure. And, besides, according to my idea, two came. One had a mask and a hired domino, a 'reach-me-down.' I know all about it. The other's face was all hidden in lace, unless it was the same who had gone and changed her costume, but that isn't probable. Besides, they did nothing but go and come. I opened the door three or four times."

"They spoke to you?"

"Oh, hardly. They just whispered a word or two. 'Madame, will you open the door for me? I am expected.' That booby of a magistrate asked me if I should recognise the voice. My faith! I told him no. Come! there am I calling him a booby, and Monsicur Darcy is his relation! It is fortunate that he doesn't hear me. He is listening to that chatterbox of an Ismérie, who is explaining to him the *variations* she is going to dance in the new ballet they are getting up at our place."

Darcy heard exceedingly well, and his face visibly brightened.

"Ah!" exclaimed little Pamela, "here come some women in funny costumes. Where can they have come from? Ah, yes! There is a masquerade ball at the Elysée Montmartre every Sunday."

"Mesdemoiselles," said the captain, "here are some truffles. Truffled partridges with Perigueux sauce. And you will have some other truffles, plain, under the napkin."

"Oh, under the napkin, like baked potatoes—that is my dream," said Pamela.

"I say, M'sieu Nointel, is it true that, in the time of the Prophet, truffles were not known?" asked Ismérie.

"On the contrary, mademoiselle. The Anabaptists made frightful use of them. A glass of Pontet-Canet, Madame Majoré."

"That isn't to be refused, my dear sir. Wine only does harm to the doctor. Where was I? Ah! I was telling you that I didn't pay much attention to the women, and that I couldn't tell whether they were blondes or brunettes, as I could not see even a lock of their hair. But they are not in question. The last one had just gone, and Madame d'Orcival did

not stir. I was thinking 'It has all passed off well. I shall have my five louis, and shall buy some shoes for my girls.' But, then, an individual comes to me—well-dressed, that's true—new gloves and fine linen—and he asks me to open 27 for him—like that, point blank. 'I am forbidden to do so,' I answered him; 'the person wishes to be alone.' Then he offers me forty francs to let him go in. Naturally I refuse. I should have lost by it—although, if I had known—and still, no, I would not have taken that monster's money. Ah! dear me, here are some people coming to sit down near us. That will prevent me finishing the story for you."

"Bah! two Americans," said Nointel, after having examined the two individuals who had seated themselves near him. "They are as drunk as Poles. Go ahead, Madame Majoré."

"It is true that they have their fill. And then those folks there don't understand French. Ismérie, you are drinking too much white wine, my girl, and that doesn't agree with you—white wine. Do like your sister, who has taken Bordeaux. Pray, look after them, Monsieur Darcy. They have a rehearsal to-morrow, and if they were to miss it they would be fined. Managers are such curs."

"Fear nothing, Madame Majoré; these young ladies are very well behaved," replied Darcy, who occupied himself much more with the mother than with the daughters. He followed her narrative without seeming to listen to it, and he would willingly have kissed her.

"And what did he do, the forty franc man, when you refused to open the door for him?" asked Nointel.

"You are going to learn. The general and the doctor had just left 29. He told me that he was one of their friends, that he had hired the box with them. Ah! he must be full of vice! And he asked me to open 29 for him. I, like a stupid, I opened it for him at once, and in he went. Now you know the rest—or you can divine it."

"I divine nothing at all."

"What! you don't divine that that villain——"

"Mamma, mamma!" exclaimed Paméla, "there's Caroline Roquillon dressed as a page! look at her. She has come from the Elysée, for sure. She is with a woman dressed as a milkmaid, and three gentlemen."

"Nice society. Where did she steal that disguise? From the stock, of course. She has some artful doings with the costumiers. I shall tell Monsieur Halanzier about it," grumbled Madame Majoré.

"I say," continued Ismérie. "here they are going to sit down behind us. Ah! dear me, but that tall fellow is Paul Guimbal, the young comedian of the Théâtre Montmartre."

"Well, now, that's worth talking about! Don't speak to that jade—or look at her fine actor—or else I shall take you home to bed, and you will have no more crawfish."

"Well, Madame Majoré," continued the captain, "we were saying that this villain——"

"Well, Monsieur Nointel, he installed himself in 29 as coolly as though he had paid for his seat there, the rascal! What did he do there? I know nothing about it, as I was on duty, and did not leave the passage. I was told that he climbed over the partition, and that he entered 27 in sight of the whole house. One thing is sure, and that is, that a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes afterwards, he opened the door, crying 'Murder.' I ran in—you may well imagine it; and I saw the poor lady lying on the couch in the little room—the knife was still sticking in her

throat—and the blood; you should have seen it. One would have said that she had upset a pot of preserves over her white domino. And he had some blood on his hands—the brigand!”

“Pardon, Madame Majoré, but I have heard of what you are relating there. That gentleman is well known in Paris, and nothing proves that it was he who——”

“When I tell you that his hands were covered with blood! Look here! he reminded me of Frederick Lemaitre in the last act of “Thirty years of a gambler’s life”—you know—when Frederick wished to kiss his little girl, and when she said to him—but no, you don’t know it—you are too young to have seen that—such a drama is no longer seen, Monsieur Nointel.”

“A superb drama, Madame Majoré. But, as to your gentleman of No. 29, I know him, and——”

“Very well, if you know him, you have noticed his face—a face one would not like to meet in a wood at night time.”

“My faith! I have often met it on the pavements of Paris, and I am obliged to declare that it did not appear terrifying to me. However, it seems to me that no one thought of accusing him.”

“Everybody, on the contrary, and I the first. The commissary of the theatre arrested him. He was taken to the lock-up. There, it seems that he got round them so well that he was let go—because he was well dressed, because he was a swell—all the people are for the rich. It is disgusting. Look here! Monsieur Majoré said to me only yesterday: Equality is but a vain word.”

The captain’s face visibly lengthened. To dream of the discovery of a grand secret, and end in listening to a senseless accusation against the inoffensive Lolif, was hard, indeed; and others than Nointel would have given up drawing anything further from this stupid box-opener. But he was not the man to be discouraged by so little.

Darcy made even a worse face over it than did his friend. He had not lost a word of the explanation, for, to hear the better, he had leaned with his elbows upon the table, without troubling himself to keep a watch over the frisky Ismérie, who took advantage of her position to exchange, behind Darcy’s back, various signs with the young comedian of the Théâtre Montmartre.

“This woman is crazy,” he thought. “We shall learn nothing from her. And Nointel is still more crazy in having brought me here. If he persists in staying, I shall go.”

“Upon my word, madame,” continued the captain, “you alone have seen clearly into the matter, and I begin to think that our magistrates are not very able. How can they have set an individual at liberty whose hands were all bloody? He probably said that his hands had touched Madame d’Orcival’s body, but that is a bad reason. Nevertheless, I see other objections. The poniard which was used in the murder was a Japanese one; it was in the form of a fan. If the scoundrel had had one, you would have noticed it when he presented himself to go in.”

“Why, no. He had it in his pocket, the coward. That is what I said to him before the examining magistrate—for I have seen him again to-day, the wretch!—they—what do they call it?—fronted—no—confronted me with him, and it almost made me ill.”

“I understand that; only—tell me—what did he say in his defence?”

“That he had nothing against Madame d’Orcival; that he scarcely knew her, and that he had no interest in ridding himself of her; that he

had an income of twenty-five thousand francs ; that no one had ever had anything to say against him—a heap of nonsense—what ! And that simple-minded magistrate swallowed it all. But it isn't finished yet, and it is I who tell you so. I shall let them defeat themselves ; and when I think it is time to speak, I will show them a real proof of what I say. It can be seen, and it will have weight."

The captain was all ears, for the box-opener's words were becoming instructive again, but she paused at the most interesting moment.

"Ah ! I have caught you at it, you worthless thing," she cried out to her eldest daughter. "You have just sent a kiss to that wretched mummer. Wait a little."

"Why, no, mamma, I assure you ; I put my hand on my mouth because I wanted to yawn."

"You lie ! It's when you are in your father's house that you yawn. Here, you are not sleepy, because there are truffles. But I don't mean you to show off before that girl Roquillon, and I will put an end to your capers. Come, young ladies, come and say good-bye ; you will eat some crawfish when I catch them in the Seine."

"But, mamma, I have done nothing," said little Paméla, whining.

Nointel came to the help of the innocent girl. He had his reasons for wishing to retain Madame Majoré, and he pleaded the cause of the young ladies so well that their mother grew calm again. The Bordeaux crawfish had something to do about producing this effect. They had just been served, and Madame Majoré liked them exceedingly.

"Tell me, my dear madame," continued he, "we were talking just now of fans. The women who went in had some, I suppose?"

"Perhaps so. It is even probable. But I didn't notice. They didn't loiter in the passage. They had the appearance of being in a hurry."

"And Madame d'Orcival also had one, no doubt?"

"Yes, and a fine one covered with paintings. It was picked up on the floor. But all that signifies nothing, and the real proof—why, I found it, this evening, before the performance, while I was sweeping the box."

The captain again commenced to hope, and Darcy, who no longer contained himself, softly rose to come and sit down by his friend's side—an unfortunate move, for it left the field open to Ismérie and her gallant from the suburbs.

Madame Majoré paid no attention to this at first. She was fully occupied in creating as much effect as possible.

"Yes," she said with animation, "I have in my pocket enough to send that bandit to the guillotine. Well, do you know what the magistrate will gain by telling me that my inventions lacked common-sense, and that I had calumniated an honest man ? He will gain by it that I shall keep my mouth shut until the day of the trial. And when the poor young lady who is accused is in the dock, I shall ask to speak to the jury, and they will have to listen to me. And I will show them what I found among the blood—and I shall say to them : 'Does that belong to her ? Can a young girl like her have ever worn sleeve-buttons like this one here ?' That will create a sensation. I shall be spoken of in the newspapers, and, thanks to that affair, my daughters will perhaps get a rise. Just think that my Ismérie receives only one hundred and fifty poor francs per month—it is for that she is so thin—and think that Paméla —"

"It is most unjust. But this sleeve-button—what makes you think that it belongs——"

"To a man? Why, it stares you in the face. It is as large as a livery button—and heavy, you ought to see it!—why, at a pawn-shop they would lend me at least fifty francs on it."

"But, madame," exclaimed Darcy, "it is your duty to surrender it at once to the examining magistrate!"

"Ah! no! ah! no! I will do as I please with that fine magistrate. And I hope very much that you will not go and tell him what I now confide to you. In the first place if they pester me to have the article, I will throw it in the Seine, and will say I have lost it. I stick to my effect at the Court of Assizes."

"You forget, madame, that an innocent woman is suffering, that she is in prison, and that it depends only on you to have her leave it."

"How can you say that to me, Monsieur Darcy? You take an interest then in this Mademoiselle La Bernelle? Very well. Well, look here! I have some heart, I have, and to please you I will carry the button to your magistrate. Yes, I will carry it—as soon as I know one thing——"

"What is that?" asked Nointel, quickly.

"As soon as I shall know the Christian name of the scoundrel who entered the box."

"His Christian name?"

"Yes, there is a letter engraved on the sleeve button."

"An initial!" exclaimed Darcy. "What is it?"

"If it is that gentleman's initial," said the captain, quietly, "it ought to be an L. His surname is Lolif."

"I am not ignorant of that," retorted the box-opener; "but it is exactly that which bothers me, and why I wished to know his Christian name."

"The letter is not an L, then."

"No. There must have been an L on the other button, the one which remained in the other wristband. Two letters are worn a good deal. To prove it, only the other day, at the rehearsal of the new ballet, the Count de Lambézlec chucked Pamela's chin. I say nothing when he chucks her chin, as he isn't dangerous. He is sixty years old, to say nothing to the months he was out at nurse. Only, I looked at his hands, because you know, the chin passes, but—in short, there was an L on one of his buttons and an R on the other, and a count's coronet on both. I asked him why it was so, and he told me that his Christian name was Roger. You see very well that it is the fashion, for he follows the fashions closely, that old fellow does. And so now I say to myself: I must know if this Lolif is called Pierre, Paul, Jacques, or Philippe, or Thomas, or Polycarpe."

"It is already a great point that the initial is not an L," murmured Darcy, who only thought of Berthe Lestérel.

"Oh! to be an L; no, it is not an L."

"Well, my dear Madame Majoré," continued the captain, "I am in a position to inform you, for I know Monsieur Lolif."

"Good! then you are going to tell me——"

"This evening, nothing. I have never troubled myself about his Christian name, for he interests me but little. But he belongs to my club, and nothing prevents me from asking him what the women call him in intimacy."

"You can tell it me to-morrow at the theatre. And then I won't make Monsieur Darcy pine, but, before I know, I don't wish to risk myself, because if the letter did not correspond with the first name of that

blackguard, the magistrate would make fun of me again. Once is quite enough."

"And the step might produce just the contrary of what we hope," added the prudent captain. "I approve of your prudence, Madame Majoré, and I promise you that as early as to-morrow you shall have the information you desire. Meanwhile, it seems to me, that nothing prevents you from informing Monsieur Darcy and I what the accusing letter is."

"Oh! nothing at all. It is a——"

It was written, however, that Gaston's anguish should not yet come to an end. Madame Majoré, instead of finishing, rose up, passed impetuously between the table at which she was seated and that where the two citizens of free America were consolidating their drunkenness with some whisky, turned round Nointel and his friend, and came down like a water-spout on the settee where Darcy had previously been sitting.

Her motherly eyes had suddenly surprised some sly manœuvres to which Ismérie and the comedian had resorted to approach each other, since they were no longer separated by a living obstacle. Their hands especially had gained ground, thanks to the leaning position gradually taken by the Chloé of the opera house and the Daphnis of Montmartre, they were about to meet, and the young actor held a microscopic note between his thumb and forefinger.

The clandestine message did not reach its address, however; indeed it came very near being confiscated by the alert and vigilant Madame Majoré. "Down with your paws," cried she. "What kind of behaviour is that? Notes right under my nose! It is fortunate that I can still see without spectacles. You, mademoiselle, push yourself up beside Pamela, and remember that at home by-and-bye you will have some business with me. And you, my little man," added the matron, turning to Monsieur Paul, "I advise you to keep yourself quiet. I have not brought up my daughter to throw her at your head, do you hear, you second-hand mummer? When it pleases her to go before the mayor, she will find some one of more account than you to take her there. And she won't turn on the water-spout for your good-looking eyes. In the first place, what are you doing here with your two hundred francs a month, and your hundred sous a night? Is this a place for such characters as you? Go and learn your cues, my little man. You can look in again when you have taken the place of Monsieur Mélingue at the Porte Saint-Martin.

The unfortunate young actor bowed his head under this avalanche of objurgations, and did not dare to breathe a word. Perhaps he feared, by retorting, to attract a mannal and immediate correction upon Ismérie. Emboldened by her page's costume, Caroline Roquillon essayed to enter into a dialogue in language such as Madame Angot might have used; but, to close her mouth, the box-opener only had to apostrophise her in these cutting terms:—"Stop your noise, you shop-rat; you ought at least to make the manager furnish you with calves, for the tights you steal from the costumier dry on billiard cues."

The intimidated milkmaid did not come to the page's succour, and their escorts realised that they could make no stand against Madame Majoré. One of them called to the waiter to have him carry their supper to the other end of the room; and the quartette went off without sound of drum or trumpet. Madame Majoré remained mistress of the battlefield. She triumphed, she exulted. Ismérie pouted and Pamela laughed in her sleeve. The captain also had a desire to laugh, but he restrained himself out of

regard for his friend, who did not in the least enjoy the comic side of the situation. Poor Darcy suffered at having to exhibit himself to the people taking supper near by, and he would willingly have run away. But he was riveted to his seat by a keen desire to know what letter there was on the sleeve-button which had been picked up by the box-opener.

"You have been superb, Madame Majoré," said Nointel; "and I swear to you that your daughter has nothing to reproach herself with. She can't prevent that young man from finding her pretty."

"Oh! I saw it all; and if that mummer ever recommences his tricks, Madame Majoré will say a couple of words to him—that's all. There is enough about that. Excuse me for having been carried away by impulse before everybody. It was stronger than myself."

"We excuse you, dear madame, and the opinion of the people who surround us must be very indifferent to you. Shall we return to the interesting narrative you were giving us just now?"

"With all my heart, captain. A glass of champagne, without commanding you. They are successful with crawfish here, but the sauce takes the skin off the tongue. What was I saying to you when that actor took those liberties?"

"You were going to tell us with what initial the famous button is marked."

"It is marked with a B, my dear sir, and if that ugly bird's first name is Bertrand or Benoît, I will go and carry the piece of jewellery to the examining magistrate to-morrow, for I shall then be sure that it was he who struck the blow."

"A 'B,'" murmured Darcy, who had turned pale. He remembered that Mademoiselle Lestérel's Christian name commenced with a B. The box-opener's discovery turned against the poor accused girl.

"We shall soon know what to depend upon in the matter; but I am of opinion that you need be in no hurry to go and see the magistrate," said Nointel, quickly, having perceived the danger.

"In a hurry! Ah! my faith, no. If I listened to myself, I should keep the article for the Court of Assizes, and if I do go to the Palais de Justice, it will be only to please you."

"It will always be time to go there. You have the button with you?"

"In my purse. Do you wish to see it?"

"Very much. It is a curiosity."

The lady rummaged in her pocket, and drew from it a huge leather purse, containing the 'tips' she had received. She there found and extracted from among numerous silver and copper coins a piece of jewellery which she deposited upon the table-cloth. "Ah! that's pretty, that is," cried Ismérie. "You ought to give it to me, to make a medallion of."

"You stupid, there is a B on it," said the little sister.

"Well, and what then? I shall get even by telling the gentlemen that my name is Berthe."

Darcy felt a contraction of the heart.

"Will you be quiet," retorted Madame Majoré. "Just learn, young ladies, that your mother isn't dishonest. On the night of the last performance of 'Hamlet,' I found a diamond brooch in No. 25, and carried it to the office. Although the skinflint of an Englishwoman to whom it belonged offered me a reward of twenty francs, I would not take it. Twenty francs for a brooch which was worth at least six thousand! If that wasn't pitiful!"

The two friends, it may well be believed, did not listen to the box-opener's protestations of probity, or her complaints. Nointel held the convicting article and was examining it carefully.

It was a button of massive gold, larger and thicker than is usually worn. The initial stood out in relief. It was in truth a B of Gothic form. The button had not the brilliancy of newness, and must have been made to order, for the style was not that of the jewellery exhibited in shop-windows.

"That can only have belonged to a man," exclaimed Darcy, who tried to take hope.

"The fact is that it is somewhat large for a woman," said the captain. "Nevertheless, there are women who do nothing like others."

"I know one of them, and that one——"

"This, at least, is certain, that the owner of this button, whether male or female, does not consider expense," interrupted Nointel. "The pair must be worth a dozen louis."

"That is just what I was saying," said Madame Majoré. "And when I think that a man who has the means to pay for gewgaws worth twelve louis assassinates, why, he can be no more nor less than a returned convict. Oh! the rich! the directing classes, as Monsieur Majoré calls them. Speaking of my poor Alfred, what time is it, gentlemen? I should like to be at the house when he comes home."

"Not yet two o'clock, dear madame. Oh, you have time enough. But, heaven forgive me, I believe there is some blood on this gold."

"Of course, that's understood. It is the button of the right sleeve—the hand that held the knife—it was covered with blood. I saw it plainly when the brigand who struck the blow left the box; and if the commissary had taken a closer look, he would have seen that the button had been torn away—it was poor Madame d'Orcival who tore it while defending herself."

"That seems to me very probable," said the captain, after reflection; "and this piece of jewellery will be of capital importance in the affair. I begin to think that you are right in wishing to keep it, if you took it to the magistrate he would be capable of mixing the affair up again. Who knows but what the Christian name of the young lady who has been arrested commences with a B? Lesurques was executed for less than that."

"That is true. I saw the 'Lyons Mail'—with Paulin Ménier in the chief part. There's a man of talent for you!"

"Do you know what I should do, if I were in your place, dear madame? My faith! I should just make an investigation. I should go to all the jewellers of Paris and ask them if they knew the article. You would certainly end by finding the one who sold it. And it would set you up if you arrived some fine morning before the magistrate to name the guilty one to him. The newspapers would speak about you."

"Yes, yes—and Alfred would be proud of his wife. Unfortunately, that cannot be. I have my daughters to watch over, my dear sir, and I am a mother before everything else. Ah! if some one would charge himself with running to the shops for me——"

"Well, Madame Majoré, if it pleased you to confide this mission to me, I would accept it, to be agreeable to you."

"I should think that it would please me, but I am afraid of being indiscreet."

"Why so? I have nothing to do since I retired from the army. I shall be delighted to do you a service, and my friend Darcy would give a good deal to prevent Madame d'Orival's murderer from going unpunished."

"Oh, well, then keep the button, captain. I rely on you to prevent me from being compromised, if it should be known——"

"Fear nothing, Madame Majoré, when the time comes Darcy will tell everything to the magistrate, who is related to him. He will tell him how things came about, and I will answer for it that the magistrate will congratulate you. Meanwhile, you will allow me to offer a pretty medallion to each of your daughters as a souvenir of the agreeable evening they have helped us to spend."

"Good, you are nice, you are," said Ismérie.

"Won't Zélie Crochet be mad," added Paméla, while clapping her hands.

"You spoil them, captain," exclaimed the mother. "But I accept, on condition that you permit Monsieur Majoré to write to you to thank you. You will see how he turns a letter. He has a way of saying things—a tact too——"

"I shall be very much flattered, dear madame. Then it is agreed. You confide the button to me. I will render you a good account of it, and I hope that you will have the glory of saving an innocent person. Now, if it pleases you, we will talk of something else. These young ladies can't find us very agreeable, and it is time that we should occupy ourselves with them."

The young ladies asked no better than to chatter, for they were not hungry, and the conversation about the crime at the opera house did not amuse them at all. Nointel, who had accomplished his purpose with the mother, set himself to the task of diverting the daughters, and he did so so well that the supper terminated as gaily as possible. Darcy himself did not cut too sorry a figure at this compulsory festivity. Since the incident of the sleeve-button he had been divided between fear and hope, but he had faith in his friend, and reproached himself for not having more ably seconded him.

The Majoré family emptied two bottles of Moët & Chandon's "Impérial," and a small flask of Madame Amphoux's Crème de Cacao. But at three o'clock the box-opener declared that she wished to leave, so as not to expose herself to her husband's reproaches, and the captain did not strongly insist on detaining her. The young actor from the Théâtre Montmartre and his interesting companions had already left the restaurant, and no one known to the two friends had shown himself there. At a quarter-past three, after the customary courtesies, Madame Majoré entered a cab with her two daughters. Nointel proposed to see her home, but she refused, under the pretext that she might meet M. Majoré at the door of his dwelling, returning home from the fraternal love-feast.

"Now, my dear fellow," said the captain to Darcy, when they found themselves alone again on the boulevard, "we are going to separate. You must want to go to bed, and I have no further need of you."

"Where are you going, then?" asked Gaston, somewhat astonished.

"To the club, and perhaps elsewhere. I am going in search of the other sleeve-button. I must have the pair. Good evening. You would embarrass me. I will call to see you to-morrow before noon."

IX.

NOINTEL's apartment was elegant and commodious, but Darcy's distanced it by several lengths. Gaston had as much experience as the captain and much more money. Thus he was luxuriously established on his ground floor in the Rue Montaigne. He had air and space, and each room was perfectly adapted to its purpose. Not a solecism in the arrangement of the furniture, not a shade which showed want of accord, no false luxury, nothing loud in this comfortable abode. There were sufficient objects of art, but not too many. Darcy had not given way to the ridiculous fancy which converts one's home into a museum or an old curiosity shop. Few books and few pictures, but these few were well chosen. More curiosities brought back by himself from journeys than gimcracks acquired at auction sale-rooms. There are bachelor apartments which have the appearance of having been arranged for the entertainment of fast women, and it might also be said that household furniture has a sex. Darcy's, at all events, was certainly of the masculine gender.

And Darcy took great pleasure amid these harmonious surroundings. He was possessed of an artistic temperament; and an error of taste shocked him just like an error of speech shocks a purist. And thus, after enforced excursions among those who sacrifice everything to effect, he gladly retreated to the commodious and charming nest he had arranged for himself. His relations with Madame d'Orceval had somewhat taken him away, but his love for Mademoiselle Lestérel, a love followed by misfortune, brought him back to his home.

How eagerly he had returned there after that supper so adroitly offered to the respectable box-opener—that supper whence he brought glimmers of hope and poignant anxiety. He felt kindly towards Nointel for not having required him to follow him about in his nocturnal rambles; for he realised that he was in no condition to effectually assist him, not that he had less ardour or intelligence than his friend, but his happiness, his future, depended on this search for information, and the influence would be overpowering and confuse his faculties, whereas the captain was personally disinterested in the matter.

On Monday morning Gaston awaited the enterprising captain impatiently, although it was hardly ten o'clock. He awaited him, while proceeding with his toilet, in a room which might pass for a model of its kind. It was spacious, with a high ceiling, and filled with ingenious contrivances. Large mirrors covered wardrobes which had each their use. There was the wardrobe for evening suits, the wardrobe for morning costumes, the wardrobe for riding garments, a closet for shoes, and one for those toilet articles, which, on account of their size, could not be accommodated on the white marble slabs of the huge washstand of English style. At the first glance, one divined that this creation, for it was one, was the result of a perfect knowledge of elegant life; and, on reflection, one admired the order which reigned in this place where, two or three times a day, one of the least orderly of the gay young men of Paris was in the habit of dressing himself. Darcy had just put on his shoes, and, half reclining on a morocco-covered divan, was smoking a cigar absent-mindedly, when Nointel entered, his hat upon his head, and a smile upon his lips.

"My dear fellow," he said, rubbing his hands, "I have not yet found

the great unknown, but I have not altogether lost my time since I left you at the door of that restaurant, where one learns so much and sees such strange sights. That Majoré is as huge as the world. And the actor from Montmartre! And the adventurers who arrive from Brazil with diamond waistcoat-buttons!"

Darcy did not in the least laugh at the recollection of these enjoyable pictures, and Nointel felt pity for his anxiety of mind. "I understand," he continued, "you don't care to have me remind you of the incidents of a festivity which so poorly amused you. You are thirsting for discoveries. Very well, I bring you at least one. Would you believe it that this box-opener guessed right, and that the initial of Lolif's Christian name is precisely a B?"

Darcy made a gesture of surprise, and his face, at the same time, expressed very deep satisfaction.

"Yes, my dear fellow, and you cannot imagine what that pretty name is. The brilliant Lolif is named Baptiste. He hides it, and in the *demi-monde* passes for Ernest, Arthur, Émile—anything except Baptiste. But I finally forced some avowals from him. I bet that he said to himself that I should know the truth by asking your uncle who took his evidence yesterday. With an examining magistrate, one can't give a fancy Christian name as you can give to women."

"Then it is very possible that the sleeve-button belongs to him."

"Unfortunately, no, that isn't possible."

"Why?"

"In the first place, because Lolif's temperament does not lead him to violent actions; next, because he had no reason for assassinating Julia; and, finally, because I have made a decisive experiment upon him."

"Decisive?—decisive, in your opinion."

"You will be of that opinion, if you will listen to me. I drew him into a corner so as to talk with him. No one saw us. They were all engaged in a game of *baccarat*, in which, by the way, that animal of a Prébord lost heavily, I was told. Serve him right. That will teach him not to calumniate the innocent after having persecuted them. Don't get impatient, however. I return to our subject. I was alone with my Lolif; I had no fear that any one would come and interrupt our conversation. Well, while searching in my pocket for my cigarette box, I brought out, as though by chance, the convicting object, and showed it to him, telling him that I had found it on the sidewalk of the boulevard."

"Well?"

"My dear fellow, not only he did not show the least emotion, but he began to explain to me in a lengthy way what was necessary to be done in order to deposit the article at the Prefecture of Police."

"What does that prove? that he controls himself well and knows how to extricate himself from a bad scrape. You will admit that if the button belonged to him he wouldn't be fool enough to say so, for he must know where he lost it."

"Well, if the button was his, he would know perfectly well that he had lost it in Julia's box; and when I told him that I had found it on the boulevard, he would have divined at once that I had set a trap for him. He would have been disturbed, and would not have advised me to carry my prize to the Prefecture. However, I am now embarking in superfluous arguments. You could never have seriously believed that Lolif killed Madame d'Orceival. That is an idea which has lodged itself in

Madame Majoré's brain; but we had better leave it there and not lose our time in following false scents."

"So be it; but where is the true one?"

"The button will help us to find it. We hold this precious object. Ismérie's mother was quite willing to confide it to me. You can bear witness that I know how to deal with box-openers."

"It is to be hoped that the daughters won't go and tell the story in the green-room."

"That would be very regrettable, for the subscribers would hear of it, and there would be at least one of them to carry it to your uncle, who might think badly of my encroaching upon his prerogatives as a magistrate; but we haven't that to fear. Madame Majoré has no desire to be compromised, and she will order those young ladies to be silent. And then I have promised each of them a locket. I shall decorate them as early as this evening at the theatre, and shall tell them that the least indiscretion on their part will do a deal of injury to their respectable mamma, and I will answer for it that they will be silent. I will even go so far, if necessary, as to promise them some earrings to compensate them for their silence. And as for the button, I declare to you that I will discover whom it belongs to."

"How will you set about it?"

"There is more than one way of proceeding. The simplest would be to show it to the jewellers, and ask them if they recognised it as having been sold by them; but that plan has some drawbacks. The first of all is, that there are very many jewellers in Paris, and that the prolonged inquiry to which I would be obliged to devote myself would necessarily become known to the police. Monsieur Roger Darcy would have me summoned, would invite me to abstain from further action, and take my button away from me. Besides, the article was perhaps bought abroad. I cannot go round the world exhibiting a sleeve-button. I conclude that that sort of a search will have to be given up. Chance alone could bring it to a successful issue, and it would be folly to depend on chance. I am determined to employ other means, and I have come to submit them to you. But first, one question: At what time do you expect Julia's maid?"

"She promised me to come this morning, but she did not state any time."

"At all events she will surely come, for she expects to receive a reward from you for the service she has rendered you, and for such others as she may render you in future. I shall see her then, and that is all I ask. My dear fellow, I rely a great deal upon this girl to unravel the situation, which is this: we hold an object the owner of which killed Julia, that is not to be doubted. I say the owner, and I absolutely set aside the hypothesis of a murder committed by a man. Excepting that lamb of a Lolif, none but women entered the box."

"Or men disguised as women."

"Ah! that supposition had not occurred to me. It will be as well to stop at it for a moment, but it will not bear a serious examination. A masculine domino always betrays himself by his height, his gait, or figure. Madame Majoré would never have been deceived. I persist in starting with the idea that the blow was struck by a feminine hand. We must now know what women knew Julia, and among these women, which are those whose names commence with a B—the surname or Christian name—for the initial of either is worn on a piece of jewellery—I even think that women prefer that of their Christian name—especially married

women—as that name generally recalls to them some agreeable recollections, while the husband’s—but I am losing myself in details. No one is better adapted to inform us respecting Madame d’Orcival’s female friends than her maid. We will pass them in review with her, and when we have picked out all those whose names begin with a B, I will give myself up to a little investigation in regard to each of those persons. How long had the maid in question been in Julia’s service?”

“Oh! for several years. I have always seen her there.”

“Then it is probable that Madame d’Orcival had no secrets from her.”

“Mariette knows a great deal. Nevertheless, she was not on a footing of familiarity with her mistress. Some fast women tell their affairs to their servants, and ask advice of them. But not Julia. She had occupied, from her very first entrance into the circle she lived in, an exceptional position, and kept her servants at a distance.”

“Oh! I readily believe that she did not play lotto with them; but at Julia’s, as at other women’s places, after a few terms of good and loyal service, an adroit maid necessarily becomes promoted to the rank of confidante. There is the coming and going of lovers; the management of entrances and exits; the secret correspondence to give and receive. A maid’s intervention is obligatory. That is why I would bet a thousand francs against a hundred that Mariette is fully informed respecting all the incidents which marked Madame d’Orcival’s connection with Golymine.”

“That is probable; but it matters little to us,” said Darcy, sadly.

“It matters a great deal to us; for, to my mind, that is the knot of the affair,” replied Nointel. “In talking with this girl, I shall push vigorous reconnaissances in the direction of Poland. But first of all I shall ask her for a list of all Julia’s female friends and acquaintances. Meantime we have already two women among the B’s.”

“Who are they?”

“Why, in the first place, there is Mademoiselle Lestérel, whose name is Berthe. Now, don’t bristle up, I beg of you. I have no intention of wounding you; you know that very well; but I am obliged to coolly examine all the possibilities, even the most unlikely ones. Now, since Mademoiselle Lestérel’s Christian name is Berthe, it is possible that the button belongs to her. Your uncle would reason in no other way, and it was from fear of furnishing him with an additional piece of evidence that I prevented Madame Majoré from going to give him the article.”

“Mademoiselle Lestérel has no jewellery. She is too poor to buy any.”

“Granted; but her poverty proves nothing. She might have received a present. Her brother-in-law certainly made her one—the fan—and it was an unlucky idea on his part. But I hasten to add that, according to my opinion, she never wore or possessed this solid gold button. I have carefully examined it, and am sure that it is of old make. It is a family jewel, and belongs to a rich family. It must have been left as an inheritance. Now, if I am not mistaken, Mademoiselle Lestérel’s father was poor, and left his daughters nothing.

“Absolutely nothing. That is an argument of some value.”

“I shall not fail to make use of it if, after having finished our investigation, we decide to deposit the button in the proper hauds. But don’t you think, like me, that somewhere in the world there is a woman who might very well have fastened her sleeves with this button—a woman whose name also commences with a B?”

“Madame de Barancos!” exclaimed Darcy. “It can be but she.”

"I am not so positive as you. Some doubts remain to me. I ask myself, for example, why the jewel is not stamped with a marchioness's coronet? This noble Havanese sticks her coronets everywhere. This evening she wore one in the shape of a clasp, diamonds and rubies, a real constellation. But, in fact, she may for once have, by chance, contented herself with an initial."

"And, besides, when a woman goes to commit a crime, she does not burden herself with articles which would lead to recognition."

"That is so. Let us not forget, however, that if Madame de Barancos entered Julia's box, it was no doubt because Julia had made an appointment with her at the ball at the opera house. She had, therefore, no need to preserve her *incognito* with Julia. But, everything well considered, well weighed, it is my conclusion that the guilty one is our marchioness. Only, don't let us hurry. Let us wait till she commits herself by some imprudence, and, meanwhile, let us inform ourselves as well as we can. More light! more light! That's what we need. It is necessary that your uncle should see clearly. It will not be a slight affair to induce him to send Madame de Barancos where he sent Mademoiselle Lestérel. And so I am anxious to talk with this maid. I am sure that she will give us the last word of the rebus."

When you talk of maids you see their wings. Just as Nointel finished his sentence, the footman announced that Madame d'Orcival's maid was there.

It may well be imagined that Darcy did not keep her waiting. Mariette entered the dressing-room with a cautious step, and appeared somewhat astonished to find the captain there, but she was not the woman to be disconcerted for so little. She wore mourning for Madame d'Orcival—a dress more elegant than severe of aspect. Many a woman of the middle-classes would have envied her her toilet of satin and black velvet, dress and hat alike. Her feet and hands were faultlessly covered, to that point that Nointel, who had never seen her before, began examining her like a connoisseur. It could not be said that she was pretty, neither could it be said that she was plain. Her hair was of no decided shade, her eyes were of an intermediate colour, and her face was without age. A provincial would have thought her distinguished looking; a collegian would have fallen in love with her. But Nointel knew this variety of the human species—a variety met seldom outside of Paris, and which seems to have been created expressly for the households of fast women. Mariette was born a waiting-maid, as Julie Berthier had been born a courtesan. In truth, she was fair-haired, and thirty-four years of age, had few scruples, a vast amount of ambition, a few vices, a very pliable disposition, and a very subtle mind.

The captain knew how to read all this in her face, and he at once thought that good use could be made of so intelligent and so tractable a person. Only he feared that Darcy would operate badly from the very outset, and he hastened to open the conversation himself. "Sit down, my girl," he said; "here, you are no longer in service, and Monsieur Darcy can certainly honour you with one of his arm-chairs." And, divining that his friend wondered at this familiarity of language, he added, addressing himself to him: "My dear fellow, when a man has been a hussar, he always talks familiarly with waiting-maids, and especially with those who are nice. I will bet that Mariette thinks it quite natural."

"Certainly, captain," replied Mariette, with a smile. "Besides, that is done in Molière's comedies."

"Good! you have read them? So much the better; that will help you to understand the situation."

"Oh, I understand it, Monsieur Nointel."

"Ah! you know me. I never went to Madame d'Orcival's, however."

"No; but formerly you often went to see a friend of her's—Madame Rissler."

"That is true. I had forgotten that old story. It was—let me see—yes, it was two years after the war. Since then I have shifted my gun—and, finally, I have settled down. How is she, Claudine Rissler? I meet her here and there, but she no longer recognises me."

"Madame Rissler is very well, captain. She has even been very lucky. She is on first-rate terms with a Russian whom she met last year at the Exhibition. And if she behaved a little better she would by this time be as rich as madame was."

"Yes, but she doesn't behave herself, I saw that. And she has no notion of hierarchy. She preferred a quartermaster of my old regiment to me."

"That does not astonish me; she is crazy about soldiers, and that will ruin her. Ah! monsieur, poor Madame Julia took no part in such foolishness—she was serious-minded. Monsieur Darcy knows that very well."

"I believe you, Mariette," said Gaston, growing impatient and anxious to approach a subject far more interesting than the pranks of one of Julia's female friends; "I believe you all the more because I know on what terms you lived with Madame d'Orcival. You were less her maid than her confidante. She hid nothing from you."

"That's true. Madame had confidence in me. She did right, for I would have thrown myself into the fire for her; and, for a million even, I wouldn't have told what she forbid me to tell. Monsieur has had proof of that. Madame requested me not to say that he was at her house when the count hanged himself. And the commissary questioned me in vain; he learnt nothing about it."

"You remind me that I am under obligations to you, my dear Mariette; other events have occurred since that affair, so that I have not had time to do for you what I propose doing; but I am going to make reparation for my negligence this very day—that is, after we have chatted."

"Monsieur is too kind. I certainly hoped very much that monsieur would not abandon me after such a misfortune—for it is my fortune I lost by losing Madame Julia. She had promised me that she would either leave me an income or a round sum, as I preferred. I should have preferred the capital, because I don't care to remain in service. I should like to set up in a little business. But madame cannot have thought of making her will—that is quite natural—at her age; she did not foresee that she was going to die so soon—and by what a death! Ah! the villainous woman who assassinated her certainly deserves the scaffold."

"And you, sly-boots," thought the captain, "you don't intend to denounce the culprit for nothing, and you state your conditions. If I don't interfere, Darcy will transfix himself."

"Rely on me, Mariette," exclaimed Gaston. "The service you have rendered me is nothing in comparison to that you are going to render me

by helping me to avenge Julia, and I shall never be able to recompense you enough. Tell me, then——”

“Monsieur overwhelms me. And I will venture to speak to monsieur of a linen shop which is for sale in the Rue Scribe—forty thousand francs for the stock and good-will.”

“At two steps from the opera house. That is nothing,” said Nointel, before his friend had time to answer; “it is done. That’s a capital idea of yours, little one. Darcy is good for forty thousand francs, and if your mistress has endowed you, as she promised you, you have now become a good match. You could marry a retired officer. Why shouldn’t Madame d’Orcival have made a will? She was an orderly woman. She didn’t think of death, that I certainly believe; but she might very well have arranged all her affairs.”

“Nothing will be known so long as the seals are not removed.”

“Ah! yes, that’s true; she leaves no heirs, I have been told.”

“No, monsieur. Madame was a natural child. She had no relations. If she has disposed of nothing in writing, it is said that the Government will have everything. A droll law, that, all the same. Ah! monsieur, it is not from self-interest—for Monsieur Darcy will not leave me in trouble—but I swear to you that it will break my heart when the furniture, the pictures, the china, and everything is sold—the pictures especially, she loved them so much. Why, she even got up in the night sometimes to look at the Fortuny. She said it did her eyes good when she had seen ugly people during the day. Just now, when they brought back her body, I did receive a blow. Will you believe they had carted it to the Morgue and had kept it there for twenty-four hours, to open it—how horrible! I have goose flesh when I think of it. And the commissary would not let her be placed on her bed—my poor mistress! She is on a mattress in the library. Claudine Rissler will come to-day to prepare everything for the burial. As for me, I should not have the courage to touch the body. She has some heart, all the same, has Madame Rissler.”

“When does the funeral take place?” asked the captain, to curtail this flow of useless lamentations.

“To-morrow morning, at eleven o’clock. I am afraid there won’t be many people there; and if Monsieur Darcy would come——”

“We will go, my girl,” said Nointel, quickly, “and perhaps we shall not be the only ones of our set to go. Your mistress had many friends?”

“Why, no, sir. Since she had known Monsieur Darcy, she had not kept up her former acquaintances. She only received women. The evening on which Count Golymine hanged himself at her house, he had entered the place in spite of me. Monsieur Darcy can tell you that, since he was there. After the count’s death, only two gentlemen came, and if madame received them, it was because she believed they came on behalf of Monsieur Darcy, and one of them, in fact, *was* sent by Monsieur Darcy.”

“By me?” exclaimed Gaston. “You are mistaken. I sent no one to Julia’s.”

“Nevertheless, that doctor assured madame that you did.”

“What doctor?”

“Dr. Saint-Galmier—a foreign doctor who treats nervous diseases.”

“Ah! ah! And the other visitor, who was that?”

“Also a foreigner. A General Simancas. This one came to ask madame for some information about Count Golymine, whom he knew very intimately, formerly. Madame showed him the door.”

"And the doctor, how did she receive him?"

"Better than the general, because she took him to be a friend of Monsieur Darcy's. He was even to have returned the next day to bring some more news of monsieur, but he was not seen again."

"That was the height of impudence!" murmured Gaston.

"Tell me, Mariette," continued the captain, "did those two gentlemen present themselves on the same day?"

"Yes, and almost at the same time. The general had gone but a few minutes when the doctor arrived. It was on Tuesday, during the afternoon. Madame had sent me in the morning to the opera house to get her box-ticket for the ball. Ah! monsieur, if I had known——"

"The fact is that that was an unfortunate idea, your mistress had. But, what would you have! it was written above that she should die by a woman's hand. She had dismissed her male friends and retained her female friends. It would have been better if she had done just the contrary."

"Her female friends, captain! But she had very few. Madame Rissler, whom you know, Delphine de Raincy, Jeanne Norbert, and Cora Darling. And then, again, she did not see them often. Monsieur Darcy did not like them, and that sufficed to make madame keep them at a distance. Nevertheless, if she had never known any but them, the misfortune would not have happened."

Darcy listened with excited attention to this enumeration of names, not one of which commenced with a B, and he was about to proceed to more direct questions, but Nointel took the lead. "I believe, in fact," he said, "that those ladies are incapable of committing a crime. It is none the less true that it was a woman who killed Julia. Why did she kill her? The deuce if I can imagine!"

"I know," retorted the waiting-maid. "She killed her to prevent her from talking. Madame knew that the jade had had a lover. Madame had to say but one word to ruin her. And it was just what I should have done if I had been in madame's place; but madame was a hundred times too good. She had proofs in her hands, letters written to a man by this very prude. She made an appointment with her at the opera house ball to return them to her, instead of obliging her to come to the Boulevard Malesherbes to fetch them. And she had returned them to her, since they were not found on her poor body. Then, the other one said to herself: 'I have them, but Madame d'Orcival has known my lover, and she could tell at any time that I, who set myself up for a virtuous woman, am nothing but a fraud. I will kill her. That is safer.' And so the hussy killed her."

"How do you know that Madame d'Orcival had any letters about her when she went to the ball?" asked the captain, while glancing at Darcy to beg him to let him conduct the questioning to the end.

"I saw them, sir. It was I who dressed madame for the ball. When she was ready she opened her rosewood stand before me, in which she kept her correspondence, and took some letters from a drawer—there was quite a big package of them—so big that she was not able to slip them in her dress body, but put them in her side pocket. And she said to me, laughing: 'Aren't they stupid, these fashionable women, to write so often?'"

"Indeed, that's plain enough, at all events. You don't know where she got those letters?"

"No; madame only told me what she wished to tell, and did not like to be questioned. That didn't prevent me, however, from divining a good many things. Thus, on the day when she wrote to this creature—she did not make any disclosures to me, and, nevertheless, I knew at once what was up. It was precisely on Tuesday, the day after Count Goly-mine's death, the day on which the two foreigners came. Madame awaited Monsieur Darcy—she still hoped that he had not quarrelled with her for good and all, and that he would come back—and it is most unfortunate that monsieur did not come back, for she would certainly have changed her mind—she would not have gone to the opera house ball if Monsieur Darcy had still been there."

Gaston gave a start. He felt that there was some truth in what the maid advanced, and that it had, perhaps, depended on him to prevent the crime which Berthe Lestérel was accused of having committed.

"Yes," sighed Nointel, "it is a fatality. You said then that she wrote on Tuesday——"

"Just about five o'clock, when she had begun to despair of seeing Monsieur Darcy again. The general and the doctor had gone. Madame rang for me, and when I entered her boudoir she was just finishing the address on the letter. She had written some others which were on her blotting pad, and had the ticket for the box before her. Then she said to me: 'Dress yourself. You are going to carry this note. And you will hand it to no one but the person herself. If any difficulties are made to prevent you from going up to see her, you will insist; you will say that you come on behalf of one of her friends, of a female relative—anything which comes into your head. The important thing is that you see her personally. However, I am certain that she will finish by seeing you. You will hand her the letter, and note what kind of a face she makes while reading it. When she has finished you will ask for an answer. I don't believe that she will give it to you in writing. She is too proud to write to a woman like me.'"

"Ah!" exclaimed Darcy, "it is certainly she—it is the marchioness!"

"And what did this princess reply to you?" asked Nointel, almost as pleased as his friend. "For you saw her, did you not?"

"Yes, I saw her, and she replied to me: 'It is all right, tell Madame d'Orceval that I will go.' You are right. A princess would not have put on more airs. She is not one, though, nor a marchioness either, this music teacher!"

Darcy suddenly fell from the height of his illusions. He had thought that Mariette was talking about the Marchioness de Barancos, and the shock was a rude one. Nointel was not less disagreeably surprised, for he also had hoped that Madame de Barancos' name would occur at the end of the narrative commenced by the waiting-maid.

As to Mariette, she did not in the least understand the discomfited look which had come over these gentlemen, for she was persuaded that they knew exceedingly well whom she was talking about. Darcy was the examining magistrate's nephew; Darcy could not be ignorant of what took place: and when she had told him the day before, at the door of the Palais de Justice, that she knew the guilty party, it was Berthe Lestérel whom she had meant to name, if the detective had not come and interrupted their conversation.

The captain thought that it was best not to give her time to understand the situation, as some interesting information might still be drawn

from her. He felt plainly that the game was turning out badly, but he wished to play it to the end.

"What music teacher?" he asked, quietly.

"The singer, of course!" replied the maid, "that girl Lestérel. Fortunately, the magistrate hasn't made a mistake. He had her locked up at once. She is at Saint Lazare, the hussy! and I hope that she will only leave there to go to the guillotine at La Roquette."

Darcy restrained himself with all his might, so as not to strangle this wretched woman, who insulted Berthe and wished her death. He was pale, he clenched his fists, and would perhaps have gone to extremes, if Nointel had not looked at him expressively. This look plainly implied: "If you break out we shall learn nothing. Keep quiet, and let me operate. All is perhaps not yet lost."

"That is true," he continued, in the most natural tone imaginable. "A young girl has been arrested who sings at concerts. All the newspapers talk about it. But they don't state that she is guilty; they even state that there are doubts in her favour."

"Doubts!" exclaimed the waiting-maid. "You don't know, then, that the knife which was found sticking in my poor mistress's neck belonged to the jade? Doubts! after what I have just told you; when I can prove that madame had made an appointment with her for the opera house ball?"

"You unsealed the letter, then, little one?"

"I! Whom do you take me for, captain? No, I did not allow myself to do any such thing. But I remember what madame said to me when she gave me the commission; and then I carried the letter. I was there when this creature read it, and her *papier-maché* face told plainly enough what she felt on reading it. She became green, and I thought she was going to faint; and when she replied to me, 'I will go,' I had no need to ask her where. I knew very well that the ball at the opera house was in question. Ah! she is cunning, she is, and a hypocrite and a sneak as well. You ought to have seen her in the magistrate's room, when she was brought in for me to recognise her. She wept like a fountain—and made grimaces and gestures like at the theatre—she wrung her hands—she did everything but tear her hair."

Darcy let a cry of anger escape him, and made a movement as if to rise.

"You suffer," said Nointel to him, calmly; "you are thinking of poor Julia. Courage, my dear fellow. Listen to Mariette, who will help us to avenge her. And you, little one, tell us a little how the confrontation ended. Did the young lady acknowledge that you had gone to her house and handed her a letter from Madame d'Orcival?"

"Acknowledge! Ah! I see plainly enough that you don't know her. She merely refused to answer the magistrate. It was in vain that he questioned her in every way; he could not draw a word from her. It is her method to play dumb. But the magistrate did not allow himself to be caught that way, any more than by her whimpering. Ah! he is a famous magistrate, is Monsieur Darcy's uncle. He is not fooled in that way. He is gentle; he is polite; he talked to this creature as though the conversation had taken place in a drawing-room; but he did not falter about sending her to prison. And there she is, thank God."

"It seems to me, my dear Mariette, that you can flatter yourself that you contributed not a little towards sending her there."

If the waiting-maid could have known what was taking place in

Darcy's heart, she would probably not have answered the captain's insinuation so frankly ; but her acuteness did not extend so far as to divine that the deed she boasted of would make Madame d'Orcival's ex-lover her enemy, and so she exclaimed : "I believe you, I did contribute to it; that is to say, that but for me the magistrate would perhaps not have decided so soon. But I dwelt so much upon my conversation with Madame Julia, I told him so much about the relations she had had with this prude, that I carried the day. Ah! Monsieur Darcy must be pleased."

Darcy's only reply was a smothered growl. Nointel thought : "Mariette, my girl, you won't get your stock of linen goods. You have just set fire to your shop. It is always that much gained for my friend, for he would have been stupid enough to part with his forty thousand." And, as he never lost his head, he said aloud : "You manœuvred exceedingly well, as far as I can see, and it is very fortunate that Madame d'Orcival charged you with the invitation she addressed to this girl Lestérel. Now the affair seems clear to me. But where the deuce had they become acquainted?"

"At boarding school, captain. Madame had been very well brought up. The girl Lestérel also."

"Had they continued seeing each other?"

"No; this pert minx set herself up for virtuous, and wouldn't visit madame, who was a hundred times better than she was. She came once to see her, however."

"When?"

"Oh, it was some time ago; two years, at least. Madame had written to her to ask for some information about one of their boarding-school friends. Do you think she answered her? Not so stupid! Mademoiselle was afraid to have her signature lying about in our house. She preferred to come in person. It was I who received her. If you could have seen how she had rigged herself out—with her thick veil and loose waterproof—her lover would not have recognised her two steps off. Ah! she knows how to disguise herself, that one does! And her demure, hypocritical airs with madame, who received her so frankly. Look here! I told madame that very day what I thought of such a poser."

"The fact is, that when one visits people, one has no right to treat them coldly. This young person is prudent, but she lacks logic. Have you any idea as to the lover she had allowed herself—the one who had received compromising letters from her, so compromising, that, in order to possess them again, she killed her former boarding-school companion?"

"Her lover? He must have been a pianist or a tenor—some starveling of an artist. A respectable man wouldn't have bothered himself with a creature who has no toilet, or style, or anything in her favour, but a dash of prettiness which will soon wear off."

Darcy said not a word, but walked furiously up and down the dressing-room, and every time he passed the captain his eyes asked him to curtail the interview.

Nointel, however, had his reasons for continuing, and paid no heed to the mute prayer addressed to him by his friend. "You exaggerate a little, Mariette," he continued. "People who know the truth have assured me that the young lady is exceedingly pretty. But she, indeed, sang for pay at concerts and gave lessons. She might have very well formed relations with some musician. Only—if the lover were an artist, a starveling, as you say, Madame d'Orcival would not be likely to know him."

"Oh! there's no danger of that. Madame held that kind of people in horror. She received none but gentlemen of good position. Never did a strolling player set foot in her house."

"Then, how is it that she had the letters of this girl, Lestérel?"

"About that, sir, I know nothing at all; madame did not tell me all her affairs."

"I believe it; but what is your idea on the matter?"

"Why? I have none."

"Well, as for me, I have one. Julia had known this Pole, Golyminé—"

"Before she knew Monsieur Darcy; yes, that is the truth. But since, I can readily swear that between her and the count there never was that much," retorted the maid quickly, making her finger-nail clink under her white teeth.

"Good! but they saw each other sometimes?"

"Never. The count only entered the house on the evening he killed himself."

"So be it! he perhaps had Mademoiselle Lestérel's letters in his pocket that evening: Julia may have taken them out of it, unless he had handed them to her."

Mariette reflected for a moment. Madame d'Orcival taking letters from Golyminé's pocket after he was dead; evidently, this idea had never entered the waiting-maid's brain. "No," she said, "no, that is impossible. The count did not remain with madame a quarter of an hour, and they quarrelled all the time. Monsieur Darcy knows that very well. He was in the boudoir. And after the misfortune, it was I who found the count hanging. Madame did not even see the body. She wouldn't enter the library, and the commissary arrived at once."

"Then," continued the captain, "I no longer understand anything, and, upon my word, I give up trying to understand. What a strange story! These letters which find themselves in a drawer of Madame d'Orcival's stand, without its being known how they got there! At all events, they cannot have been there long. Julia could not have kept them, since she wished to return them. You saw them, you told me?"

"Yes, just as madame was about to start for the ball."

"And there were a number of them?"

"Oh! a quantity—and well arranged—they were divided in packets, and tied up with red ribbons."

"This Lestérel young lady must have a famous rage for writing to have blackened so much paper!"

"That is nothing astonishing. Girls who have received some education are all like that. They wish to show their lovers that they have a good style of composition, and that settles them. Madame also had some style of composition, but she wrote as little as possible."

"Oh, Julia was very able. But you are right, fashionable women have a rage for scribbling. I have been told of one who uses a ream of letter-paper a month. It is true that this Marchioness de Barancos thinks herself obliged to carry everything to extremes."

"The Marchioness de Barancos! Ah, madame did not like her much."

"Bah! Did she know her?"

"By meeting her in the Bois, and at theatres, that's all. But madame could not bear foreign women. She thought that this marchioness had an insolent manner."

"Julia wasn't wrong."

"And, then, there was another reason—and I can tell it to you now that my poor mistress is dead. Madame imagined that Monsieur Darcy was courting Madame de Barancos, and, when Monsieur Darcy parted from madame, she thought it was to marry this Spanish woman. So, just think how she must have detested her!"

Since Nointel had pronounced the marchioness's name, Darcy had stopped short in the midst of his furious promenade, and was listening with earnest attention to the maid's replies.

"That is true," he said, seeking to assume a negligent manner, so as to hide his emotion. "On the day of our separation, Julia made a scene with me out of jealousy of this Madame de Barancos. She spoke to you about it, then?"

"Only a few words," replied Mariette. "Madame said that she would have her revenge if Monsieur Darcy married the marchioness."

"She did not say how she would revenge herself?"

"Oh! it wasn't serious. Madame could do nothing against a person of the highest society."

"She never sent you to Madame de Barancos'?"

"Why, no, monsieur. What for?" replied the waiting-maid very naturally.

"I say, Mariette," continued the captain laughing, "you declared just now that Madame d'Orcival never wrote. Did I dream that you told us just now that, the day when she sent you to Mademoiselle Lestérel's, she had a pile of letters before her which she had just sealed? It seems to me that at that time she did not deprive herself of writing."

"A pile? no, captain," replied the maid gaily. "There were two or three, not more, I'm sure. I even remember that I asked madame if she wished me to post them on my way to the Rue de Ponthieu, and she answered me: 'No, it is useless, I am going to dine with Madame Rissler, who lives but two steps off. I am going on foot. I need exercise, and I will drop these notes in the box myself.'"

At this moment Darcy's valet entered to announce breakfast, and Darcy was about to send him away with orders not to serve it yet, for he began to relish Mariette's talk since she had spoken of Madame d'Orcival's hatred of the marchioness, and wished to question her himself. But Nointel, thinking quite differently from his friend, judged that the questioning of the maid had produced all it could produce, and that it would be bad policy to continue it.

"My dear fellow," he said, taking Darcy's arm, "I detest burnt cutlets as much as Julia detested the marchioness. Thank Mariette, who has rendered you a real service, and who will render you still more. Tell her that she will always find you at home in the morning, and—let us go to breakfast."

The maid had risen and acted as though about to take her leave, but she looked at Darcy askance, and one did not need to be a sorcerer to divine that she was asking herself if he were going to let her go without recompensing her. "Give fifty louis, a hundred louis, if you like," whispered the captain to his friend. "We might again have need of her."

Darcy had the amount in his pocket, and he yielded to the advice, although he had no reason to congratulate himself on the information he had received from Mariette. But he had to pay her for her discretion in

the affair of the suicide, and, besides, he thought it best not to be on bad terms with her.

The waiting-maid pocketed the two one-thousand franc notes with an air of indifferent satisfaction. It was plainly to be seen that she had expected to do better, and that she still relied on Darcy's future generosity to set herself up in business. She went off, however, smiling at the captain, who had made a conquest of her, and promising him that she would return.

"I know enough about it now," said Nointel, "and we are going to chat seriously."

Darcy asked no better, for he was anxious to know what his friend thought of the maid's declarations. Before approaching this throbbing subject, however, it was necessary that he should suffer the servant to serve the two dishes ordained for a bachelor breakfast: cutlets and eggs. It is the torment of the rich to have to submit to the enforced presence of servants at certain times during the day. But Darcy was controlled as little as possible by these rules, and as soon as he and his companion at the table had only to deal with a *pâté* of truffled partridges, he sent François away.

"My dear fellow," he said sadly, on finding himself alone with Nointel, "I begin to hope for nothing now."

"You do wrong," replied the captain. "The situation is evidently worse than we supposed it to be before seeing Mariette, but I do not think it lost beyond recovery. Will you allow me to tell you frankly how I look at it?"

"What a question?"

"I warn you that I am going to grieve you. I am going to be severe—severe and salutary, like the dentist's instrument which extirpates a tooth. It is an illusion which I am going to try to tear from you. Perhaps I shall not succeed in it, but I am unfortunately sure to make you suffer. And so, examine yourself. If you prefer to evade the operation I will be silent, but I shall act none the less."

"At the point I have reached, a grief more or less matters little to me. Speak."

"Very well; I declare to you that, in my opinion, it is no longer possible to doubt Mademoiselle Lestérel's presence in Julia's box during the night of the ball."

"Then Mademoiselle Lestérel is guilty—my uncle did right to have her arrested—the jury will do right to convict her."

"Excuse me! I did not say that. I said that Mademoiselle Lestérel kept the appointment made with her in writing by her former boarding-school friend; but I have drawn no conclusion from that fact."

"But the conclusion draws itself. If Berthe went there, it was Berthe who killed Julia."

"It is possible that it was she. But it is not certain, as I will demonstrate to you presently. Meanwhile I return to my point of departure. Do you admit, as I do, that this maid carried a letter to Mademoiselle Lestérel from Madame d'Orcival? that this letter contained an urgent invitation—a summons to appear, as lawyers say, and that Mademoiselle Lestérel replied: 'I will go?' In a word, do you admit that Mariette told the truth to your uncle and to us?"

"I know nothing about it," stammered Darcy, who was trying to deceive himself.

"That is evidence itself," continued the unmerciful Nointel. "This girl has no interest which would lead her to lie. I was even struck with this circumstance: that she does not try to pass herself off as being better informed than she really is. Thus, she does not pretend that her mistress confided to her what she wrote to Mademoiselle Lestérel. A proof of sincerity. Others would have embellished the story. She merely tells what she saw—she repeats solely what she heard: Mademoiselle Lestérel disturbed while reading Madame d'Orcival's note, and saying, 'I will go.' Madame d'Orcival dressed for the ball and stuffing her pockets with letters. You will admit, that if one connects all this with the discovery of the Japanese poniard left in the wound, one is logically brought to believe that Mademoiselle Lestérel entered the box."

"And that she assassinated Julia," said Darcy, bitterly. "The one is the consequence of the other."

"Not at all! and this is why: Mademoiselle Lestérel entered the box, that is clear; another woman also may have entered it."

"Yes—I had already thought of that; but—on what do you found such a supposition?"

"On certain observations I have made; points of detail which, isolated, are almost nothing, but which, collected together, acquire great value, for they all agree."

"Explain yourself. You make me die of impatience with your deductions."

"My dear fellow, that isn't my fault; I was born methodical. I come to the facts. You were at the ball—is it not so? You sat in the club-box, and from there you saw a woman in a domino enter Julia's box."

"Yes."

"About what time did that occur?"

"At half-past twelve—perhaps a little later."

"And the crime was committed at three o'clock—that is perfectly established. It isn't probable that an interview between Julia and the person who came after some compromising letters lasted two hours and a half. It is also proved that there were several interviews. Madame Majoré declares that she opened the box three or four times."

"That is true."

"Good! Now, it is not to be doubted that Julia was assassinated during the last visit. She made intermittent appearances in front of her box until three o'clock. At that time she again withdrew to the little room at the back, and was seen no more. Is that correct?"

"Perfectly."

"Very well; is it to be believed that the visitor of half-past twelve returned at two o'clock, at half-past two, and finally at three o'clock? Let us examine this hypothesis. I talk as my professor talked when I was cramming for Saint-Cyr; but it is compulsory. Behold then a fashionable woman who arrives quite excited by a rendezvous assigned to her by a fast woman who holds her correspondence. She enters; she confers with Julia, who returns her letters to her, or does not return them. In either case, the fashionable woman would, no doubt, hasten to leave the ball—is it not so? She had come there in the greatest secrecy; she had had a thousand difficulties in leaving home *incognito*; she would still have more trouble to return without being seen. In the midst of the crowd she trembles lest some one should recognise her. She is anxious to escape. No; not at all. This woman remains at the opera house. She leaves the

box, she returns to it, she leaves it again, then she returns to it once more. Where does she go during these intermissions? To the lobby, to mystify some provincials, no doubt! And, after all these trips, she finally determines to slaughter Madame d'Orcival. Acknowledge that it is astonishing."

"It is absurd; it is impossible."

"Completely impossible, my friend. But if, on the contrary, it is admitted that two women came, everything is understood, everything explains itself. The first one arrives at half-past twelve, terminates her negotiations with Julia, and steals away with her letters. The other one comes at about half-past two. Julia had taken care to leave intervals between her appointments. With this second woman the interview is stormy. They do not succeed in coming to an understanding. She goes out without her letters. She is desperate, exasperated. She can no longer control herself. She must have these love-missives, which may ruin her, at any cost. She returns to the box. Julia is still there. The conversation commences again. Julia still refuses because her conditions are not accepted. The fashionable woman then stabs her, takes her letters, and goes off not to return again. There, my dear friend, what do you say to my romance?"

"It is not a romance," exclaimed Darcy; "things must have taken place like that—I believe it—and, nevertheless, don't you think it strange that Julia possessed so many secrets? By what strange accident could she have had the letters of two fashionable women confided to her?"

"My dear fellow on that point I have a positive idea. I am convinced that Madame d'Orcival's secrets were Golymine's. It is the only inheritance he left her. How and when he transmitted it I don't know, and it matters little to us, but I am almost certain of the fact. Julia must have wished to liquidate this estate at a single stroke. Now, the said Golymine had had more than one love affair. And I should not be surprised if Julia gave appointments to half-a-dozen women to come to the opera house ball. Two is the minimum."

"Mariette, however, took but one letter."

"Yes, but she told you that on the same day, at the same time, Julia had written some others. She also told you that the accusing package she carried to the ball was so large that she was unable to put it in her dress-body. Now, as much of a scribbler as a woman may be, she does not write a volume during the progress of a love affair. So this package was the work of several of Golymine's victims. Mariette also remarked that the aforesaid package was divided into fractions, tied up with rose-coloured or blue ribbons. And she remembered, did Mariette, that Julia exclaimed just as she was going away: 'Aren't they stupid, *those* fashionable women?' Did you remark that plural?"

"No, I had not full control over my thoughts. This girl talked about Mademoiselle Lestérel in terms which greatly irritated me."

"She believed that she caused you extreme pleasure, for, very fortunately, she does not suspect that you love the person accused of having killed Madame d'Orcival. And you would be wrong to bear a grudge against her, for her evidence will be exceedingly useful to us in proving that the suspected party cannot be guilty."

"There remains the Japanese poniard."

"The Japanese poniard does not trouble me at all. Mademoiselle Lestérel may have forgotten it in the box, or, what is more probable, Julia may have asked her for it, and the poor child could not refuse it to

her. She was only too happy to get off so cheaply. So, the poniard remained with Madame d'Orcival. Who knows but, when the discussion became hot between Julia and the other woman, she drew it from its sheath to show that she had something to defend herself with? You see the scene from here. The other woman suddenly snatches it from her hands, plants it in her throat, and leaves it there. She would certainly not have left it, if it had belonged to her."

"Well, really, that is still another proof in favour of Mademoiselle Lestérel. And now, don't you think that I have grounds for going to my uncle with you, and laying your concise reasonings before him?"

"My dear Darcy," said the captain, with some little embarrassment, "I think that the step would be premature, and that you don't dream of a danger I am going to call your attention to. It would be premature because we cannot yet accuse the marchioness."

"But, it seems to me, that there are points against her which are almost equivalent to certainties. The marchioness, probably, had Golymine for a lover. Simancas knows this and recognises her in Julia's box. That is why she receives him. The sleeve-button bears the initial of her surname——"

"And of Mademoiselle Lestérel's Christian name, my dear friend. This button is a two-edged weapon."

"So be it! but Mariette has just told us that her mistress detested the marchioness. And I could attest it. Julia made scenes with me ten times about that foreign woman. She imagined that I wished to marry her."

"From which it follows, that if Madame de Barancos had been assassinated, there would have been grounds for accusing Madame d'Orcival. Now, it is just the contrary which has happened, and Madame de Barancos had no motives of hatred against Julia. But let us pass to another side of the question—a more delicate part of the affair. And here I beg of you to screw up your courage, for I am going to insert the probe into the wound."

"What do you mean?"

"Listen to me! My supposition, which you have just adopted, is this: Mademoiselle Lestérel went to the ball at the opera house, where Madame d'Orcival had made an appointment with her. She entered box No. 27, but remained there only a quarter of an hour. On leaving she forgot her poniard-fan. Another woman—let us say Madame de Barancos, if you like, came in later on, found the weapon, and employed it to kill Madame d'Orcival. That is it, is it not?"

"Perfectly!"

"Good! But what did Mademoiselle Lestérel go to the opera house for? To fetch some compromising letters which Madame d'Orcival was to return to her, with or without conditions. These letters, to whom had Mademoiselle Lestérel written them?—to a lover?"

"Nointel!" exclaimed Darcy.

"My dear fellow, I warned you that I should be obliged to be cruel. If you wish me not to go any further, I will be silent. But if you care to have my help, you will do as well to let me argue as I understand it," said the captain, coldly.

"So be it! continuc. I will reply to you afterwards."

"As much as you like. I was saying, then, that if we succeed in demonstrating that things happened as we suppose, we shall arrive at

the same time as demonstrating that Mademoiselle Lestérel had a lover. All that I know about her seems to prove the contrary ; apparently she had always led an irreproachable life. But her visit to Julia's box suffices to destroy the favourable presumptions of her virtue. Why should she have risked her reputation by going to the ball at the opera house? You won't pretend that it was to save the honour of another woman?"

"Yes, I do pretend it," replied Darcy, in a firm tone.

His face had brightened, his eyes glistened, and Nointel, much struck by this sudden change, exclaimed : "You have, no doubt, good reasons to give me in support of your opinion. I shall be delighted to hear them, and to reply to them, if they appear to me conclusive."

"Come into my dressing-room," continued Darcy, bluntly. "François will serve us our coffee there. I must dress myself to go out."

Nointel, who had finished his breakfast while he chatted, followed his friend. "Poor boy!" he thought. "I fancy he will find some trouble in explaining the conduct of his adored one to me. If my logic cures him of a senseless passion, I shall not regret having wounded him."

As soon as they had passed into the dressing-room, Darcy took up a position in front of the captain, and said to him: "You have forgotten that Mademoiselle Lestérel has a sister."

"Not at all. I remember very well that you told me of your visit to the Rue Caumartin, of the arrival of the husband, and of the scene which followed. You omitted in your narrative but one thing. You did not tell me the name of this furious whaler who wished to kill his wife."

"His name is Crozon."

"Crozon—a sea captain—I know him."

"What! you know Mademoiselle Lestérel's brother-in-law?"

"Perfectly well. It astonishes you, no doubt, but I will explain the mystery to you in a couple of words. On leaving Saint-Cyr, some years ago, I was sent to Mexico as a sub-lieutenant of mounted riflemen. We embarked—my men, my horses, and I—on a merchant vessel, which was one of the worst crafts in the world. It had for its second officer a certain Crozon, who is no doubt your man. I have since heard that he had become a captain, was married, and commanded a whaling ship for a firm at Havre. Continue."

"Mademoiselle Lestérel has a sister, I was telling you. This sister deceived her husband. I had but little doubt of it after the scene at which I was present. Now, I don't doubt it at all. Why shouldn't she have deceived him with Golymine?"

"I see what you are leading up to. Then you suppose that the letters possessed by Julia came from Madame Crozon. That is possible, and would make a great change in the thesis. But permit me to say to you that it is improbable."

"What are the improbabilities?"

"There are three or four of them. In the first place, where the deuce would you expect Golymine to have met a woman of Madame Crozon's station? Women of that class were not his game. And unless this one was exceptionally beautiful——"

"She is so no longer, but she must have been once. She resembles her young sister in every feature."

"Who, I know, is charming. It remains to be explained, however, how this connection could have been formed. Golymine led a mad life, and this young woman could, I suppose, have but little frequented his

favourite resorts. And then again, who could have introduced him to her? Not Mademoiselle Berthe, assuredly."

"No. But you know that everything happens in Paris."

"Well, that is very true. I have seen prodigious things of the kind."

"Besides, Madame Crozon was alone during two years. Her husband was going from sea to sea."

"And she was going about to theatres and promenades. I am only astonished that Mademoiselle Lestérel did not cease seeing so compromising a sister."

"She was no doubt in ignorance of her conduct—and then, this sister had been as a mother to her. She loves her passionately; and she told me that she was ready to sacrifice herself for her. What would you have had her do? Ought she to have abandoned her in her misfortune?"

"No. But at what time, in your opinion, did Golymine enter into relations with Madame Crozon?"

"Last year, I suppose. This furious husband accused his wife of having been confined clandestinely a month ago."

"Last year Golymine was no longer the lover of Madame d'Orcival, or of Madame de Barancos—that is, if the marchioness really had a weakness for this Pole, and, for my part, I am convinced of it. Last year he wasn't known to have a mistress; he may have concealed his amours, and have consoled himself for his disgrace in fashionable society and the fast circles by seducing a modest, pretty woman. But tell me, was it the suicide of the self-styled count which brought the intrigue to a close?"

"It had ceased before the suicide; at least that is what the husband said while I was hidden in the little room. He cried out at the top of his voice: 'I know just when and why your lover left you. He has gone, but he will return, and then I will kill him.'"

"Ah! it seems to me that it was rumoured last winter that Golymine had gone to England to escape his creditors. All this agrees sufficiently, and I begin to think that your supposition is admissible—on this point alone, that Madame Crozon may have been the Pole's mistress, for as to the rest—let us see, if the letters were from the whaleman's wife, why shouldn't Madame d'Orcival have written to that woman, instead of laying the fault upon the sister?"

"Because Madame d'Orcival was anxious to humiliate Mademoiselle Lestérel. You did not hear, then, what Mariette told you? Julia did not forgive her former boarding-school friend for having followed a different road from herself, and for repelling her advances. Perhaps, too, she knew that Madame Crozon was too ill to come to the ball."

"And you think that Mademoiselle Lestérel did not hesitate about running the risk of the adventure?"

"To refuse would have been to kill her sister. Madame d'Orcival would have sent the letters to the husband."

"And this husband, I admit, is quite capable of wringing his wife's neck, if he read the correspondence. I was with him a great deal during our passage from Saint-Nazaire to Vera Cruz. He is a good enough fellow at heart—brave, honest, even obliging, but sufficiently violent to blow up his ship in a fit of anger, and as strong as the Hercules of a show-booth. I saw him once seize a sailor, who had replied to him improperly, by the belt, and throw him overboard. It is true that he threw himself into the sea to fish him out again."

"Then you ought to understand that Mademoiselle Lestérel has sacrificed herself."

"Well, yes; since we are wandering about the vast field of conjecture, that is as good a one as another. Let us examine it. I should be delighted if it turned out true, for I acknowledge that the other one was repugnant to me. It was hard for me to believe that a young girl whom you are resolved to marry—"

"I have let you talk on, I have borne what you called a salutary operation, without complaint. The operation is accomplished. So, I beg of you, Nointel, do not re-open the wound. I accept your ideas. I think as you do that Mademoiselle Lestérel went to the ball; that she saw Julia there, that she left at once, and that the guilty party is Madame de Barancos. Why should I not expose all our reasons to my uncle? Do you think that he would not understand the cause which prevented Mademoiselle Lestérel from telling the truth?"

"I don't know; but I reply that he would then wish to question Madame Crozon. If he questions her, the husband will suspect what is taking place, and will kill his wife. And then, I bet, that Mademoiselle Lestérel, fearing the fatal consequences of an avowal, would persist in maintaining that she did not go to the ball. If she persisted, what would our hypothesis be worth, ingenious as it is? Nothing at all. The magistrate would meet you like this: 'You assert that the prisoner entered the box at half-past twelve and remained there but ten minutes. Very well. Do me the pleasure to tell me where she went next. She returned to the Rue de Ponthieu at four o'clock in the morning.' What would you reply? Nothing, because even admitting our method of explaining matters, this total eclipse is inexplicable. And the judge would explain it by saying: 'It is possible that she left the box, but she returned there; she was still there at three o'clock, and it is she who struck the blow.'"

Darcy hung his head, and sought for arguments, which he did not find.

"Ah!" continued Nointel, "it would be quite different if we could prove that Madame de Barancos also had paid Julia a visit, and that the visit took place much later than Mademoiselle Lestérel's. Then we should be very strong and should rapidly attain our end. But if we reverse the proper order we shall accomplish no good. Let us commence by finding the guilty one. When we have her, the rest will all come right. Until we have reached that result, the most extreme prudence must be observed."

"Then you wish us to abstain from acting. We might as well give up the game."

"Who talks of abstaining. We are going to work actively, on the contrary. I have charged myself with the marchioness. And while awaiting something better, you must try to get some clues from your uncle."

"You may think that easy!" exclaimed Darcy. "My uncle has given me to understand that he will not tell me a single word about the progress of the investigation."

"Bah! by seeing him often, you will be sure to collect a few particulars. Do you want me to tell you of a way by which you can keep yourself informed? See Madame Cambry often. She interests herself very much in Mademoiselle Lestérel, and your uncle has determined to marry her. She would need to be very unskilful if she can't obtain some disclosures from him. Magistrates are men, my dear fellow; and

Monsieur Roger Darcy could not think badly of your showing yourself attentive to a lady who will soon be your aunt. Your visits would even be agreeable to him, for they would show him that you had no rancour against him on account of his marriage. And it is somewhat meritorious on your part to accept the matter gaily, since you lose an income of eighty thousand francs by it."

"I have had the same idea as yourself," said Darcy, without attending to the allusion to the lost inheritance. "Indeed, it is to go and call on Madame Cambry that I am now dressing myself."

"Excellent. You are getting into the right path. No weakness, my boy. No sentimentality. Act as though you had never seen Mademoiselle Lestérel. A man does not gain battles when he lacks coolness. And now that we are going to operate separately, permit me to indicate the point of attack. Your uncle has heard Mariette; he knows that the prisoner received a letter from Madame d'Orcival, and that she went to the rendez-vous. Perhaps he knows more about it. If, for instance, that letter of Julia's was found at Mademoiselle Lestérel's, he will know what time was set for this meeting. As he probably doesn't dream of the hypothesis of two women, the time has no great importance for him, but to us its importance is enormous. If it were proved that your friend entered the box between midnight and one o'clock, I would answer for her acquittal. That is the information which must be drawn from Monsieur Roger Darcy. The beautiful widow of the Avenue d'Eylau will succeed in this, I am convinced of that. Arrange matters so as to obtain her co-operation."

"She has promised it me, and she will keep her promise; for she has a truly extraordinary friendship for Mademoiselle Lestérel. She had divined that I loved Berthe, and that I wished to marry her, and she advised my uncle not to oppose the marriage."

"She may have changed her opinion since the last events; but it suffices that she is not hostile to Mademoiselle Lestérel. Then, it is understood, you are going at once to consult her. As for me, I shall cling to the marchioness. She has made me promise to go and see her. I shall go. And I also reserve to myself the conducting of an accessory investigation. It is necessary that I should know what to rely upon as regards Madame Crozon's conduct. Had she—yes or no—any connection with Golymine, or another? That must be cleared up, and I wish to have my mind at rest in regard to it."

"I greatly hope that you are not going to throw yourself into the midst of the whaleman's household, under pretext of informing yourself. That would be exposing the wife to the husband's vengeance, without utility to any one."

"I'm not so foolish. I shall address myself to the husband exclusively. I have told you that I formerly knew him. We were then the best friends in the world, and I should have no trouble in renewing friendship with him. Only, I can't go to his house. I should like to meet him as if by chance, and to do this there is but one course—to discover the *café* he frequents, his *café*. He wouldn't be a whaler if he hadn't a favourite *café*. I shall find him, of that I am sure. Now, let us talk of something else. Mariette has informed us that Madame d'Orcival is to be buried to-morrow. Shall you attend the ceremony?"

"I don't know, and I consult you. What do you think I ought to do?"

"Well, the case is somewhat embarrassing. There are things for and against. If you don't go, it will be said in a certain society that you

very soon forget your best friends. If you do go, people will look at you as at some curious beast, and your attitude will be commented upon. In your place, I think I should stay away. I believe that your uncle would be pleased if you didn't show yourself at the funeral. Besides, what part would you play there? Would you be chief mourner? No, eh! We do not even know at whose expense the funeral takes place, since Julia leaves no relations."

"You are right; I shall not go."

"And you will do well. As for myself, however, I shall go. No one will notice me, and I shall, perhaps, see something of interest there. Mariette will be there. Lolif will be there as well. All Julia's female friends will be there. I shall chat, I shall obtain information, and I bet that I shall not lose my time. But you are now ready, if I am not mistaken. What time is it? Oh, very nearly two o'clock. And I meant to have a ride at half-past twelve. However, it seems to me that it is a little early to pay a visit to Madame Cambry."

"She won't bear me ill-will for my haste. I am even convinced that she awaits me."

"How are you going there?"

"In my 'duke,' as it is fine weather."

"Good! You must drop me at the end of the Avenue des Champs-Élysées, then. I shall go into Tattersall's for a moment, and then return home on foot. I must dress to go and see the marchioness before dinner."

Gaston's valet entered just then to announce that the "duke" was ready. Darcy had finished his toilet, a costume fitted to the occasion—correct and severe—almost half-mourning. The captain poured himself out a last glass of old Martell brandy, to follow suit to a cup of excellent coffee which he had relished like a connoisseur. "Come," he said, "our plan is determined upon. The council is at an end. Now for action."

The "duke" waited at the door—a duke constructed after Darcy's ideas, and he understood the matter; black body and wheels, dark morocco lining, imperceptible harness. The horse, a singed sorrel, stepping high, was held in hand by a groom sixteen years old, in a dark livery.

The two friends entered the carriage; the groom climbed briskly to the little seat perched behind. Darcy took the reins and gave the sorrel, which only asked to trot, his head.

The Champs-Élysées were but two steps off, and the avenue was overflowing with promenaders. A fine, sunny winter's day had attracted all elegant Paris there.

"Ah!" exclaimed Nointel, "Saint-Galmier in a victoria! He has his own carriage now, then?"

"Oh!" said Darcy, "a hired victoria. The coachman looks like a *figurante* in 'L'Assommoir,' and the horse has a spavin."

"All the same, this luxury is to be noted. This worthy doctor is Simancas' partner, remember; and, since the opera house ball, Simaneas' affairs seems to go exceedingly well."

"Two men to be watched, my dear fellow."

"Ah! here's Pré'ord, cantering on his grey mare. I bet that he is watching the marchioness."

The captain had guessed right. A hundred paces further on Darcy's "duke" was passed by a carriage, going at a furious pace—a turn-out of wonderful style—with eight springs, coronetted panels and harness, a

coachman with powdered hair, in a livery of amaranth and gold, footmen as tall as life guardsmen, and Anglo-Norman horses of high action.

On the blue satin cushions of this princely equipage Madame de Barancos sat enthroned in a grand promenade toilet, all velvet and Russian sable. She was not seated there alone. To her left there was a gentleman, affectingly covered with furs like a Russian boyard—a gentleman who saluted his acquaintances profusely, and at a great distance—a gentleman whose face the two friends did not have time to see, for the carriage passed by like a flash.

Nointel, however, recognised him by his general appearance and a certain shape of hat, which recalled the head-covering of the illustrious Bolivar, the liberator of Central America.

"God forgive me," said the captain, "it is Simancas; Simancas going to the Bois de Boulogne with the marchioness. That is something significant. I will bet that Saint-Galmier is going to join them at Madrid in his yellow victoria. At the pace his nag is going, he will be there in an hour and a half. But the two rascals hold that woman Barancos, and they will not relax their hold on her unless I should rid her of them. Ah! look, Prébord manœuvres to approach the calash. I am curious to see how he will be received. That's it—he puts his mare to a gallop, and begins caracoling near the carriage door. That is what may be called waiting for a marchioness at the corner of a wood. But there's Madame de Barancos making use of her parasol as a screen—she plays with it as she plays with her fan. Yes, gallop, my little man; you will not even see the end of your marchioness's nose. Ah! he gives it up; he spurs his hack, which jerks like a cab-horse, and changes his course. Prébord's account is definitively settled. I am not sorry for what has happened to him, and I suspect that Simancas is not a stranger to the event. So much the better; they will mutually detest each other, and will perhaps finish by mutually destroying each other."

"He looks furious," said Darcy.

"He perhaps suspects that we have witnessed the scene of the parasol, for he has just perceived us. Good! he passes us without saying good-day. That is the opening of hostilities. It suits me. The rogue wants war; he shall have it—a little later on. Just at present we have other business. Here we are at the Arc de Triomphe. I am going to leave you now. Don't forget my instructions, or lose courage. Something tells me that we shall succeed."

"When shall I see you?"

"As soon as I have some news to tell you," replied the captain, alighting.

Darcy started his horse again, for he was anxious to meet Madame Cambry. With her, he would at last be able to talk of Berthe in a way in conformity with his thoughts. Nointel was the most devoted of friends, the most active and most intelligent of auxiliaries; but Nointel did not believe in Mademoiselle Lestérel's innocence. He, at least, doubted it, and his doubts manifested themselves in all he said. Darcy, who rendered justice to his intentions, suffered while listening to him. Lovers have faith, and the language of the incredulous shocks them. As for Madame Cambry, however, she had no doubts. Madame Cambry loved Berthe as a sister; she had said so to Gaston the day before; she had promised him to defend her, to plead her cause with M. Roger Darcy, and she had exclaimed on leaving him: "I am certain that we shall save her."

The mansion of this beautiful and generous widow was situated half-way down the Avenue d'Eylau, and had a fine appearance. A majestic gateway and a seignorial courtyard preceded a large central building flanked by two wings extending back, beyond which there was a vast garden full of trees of half a century's growth, which is a very respectable age for the trees of Paris.

Darcy stopped his sorrel before the little door contiguous to the porter's lodge, and sent his groom to ask if Madame Cambry was at home.

A cab stood before the gateway, and this cab had evidently just arrived, for the driver was engaged in passing the feed-bag, full of oats, over the horse's neck. Darcy concluded from this that Madame Cambry was at home to visitors, and he was not mistaken, for the groom came back with an affirmative reply. He even thought he recognised, from the way in which the porter saluted him, that Madame Cambry had given orders for him to be allowed to enter if he presented himself. He was not on sufficiently familiar terms with the household to venture to ask whom the cab had brought, although he was interested in knowing it, so as not to meet a person who might annoy him. He therefore abstained from any question, and crossed the courtyard while the bell which announced visitors rang.

A footman of discreet demeanour, in a brown livery, appeared at the entrance, and introduced Darcy into a spacious vestibule, which somewhat resembled a minister's waiting-room. No fashionable inutilities, no flowers; nothing but some settees covered with moleskin, a table with the indispensable bowl for receiving visiting cards, and mahogany hat racks. It was correct, cold, and somewhat bare. At the very first step you took in this handsome mansion, you could see that Madame Cambry did not care for modern refinements.

The reception-rooms occupied the ground floor—a raised ground-floor, with the kitchen and pantries in the basement; and when Madame Cambry received visitors she preferred to occupy a drawing-room which looked out into the garden. It was there that Darcy had told Berthe Lestérel that he loved her, and it would have cost him something to again view the piano on which he had accompanied her, while she sang that air, the prophetic words of which he thought he could still hear: "The sorrows of love last all the life." But on this day, as an exception, Madame Cambry had not left the first floor. Darcy blessed her for sparing him the bitterness of a sad remembrance, and, conducted by the footman, he ascended the grand staircase—a solemn staircase, destitute of hangings and pictures alike.

A surprise awaited him in the somewhat simply-furnished boudoir in which she received him. His uncle was there, occupying a chair close to the lounge on which the beautiful widow sat—his uncle in morning costume, a relatively unceremonious one, that of a magistrate who has been engaged in his official duties—his uncle, grave, thoughtful, and pre-occupied, like a man who brings bad news. Madame Cambry was listening to him with restless attention, and Gaston was struck by the change in her appearance. She was very pale, and one could see that her beautiful eyes had wept. He also remarked that she was dressed in black, as though she wore mourning for poor Berthe.

Madame Cambry received Darcy warmly, and, after the required courtesies, she opened the conversation with these words, which seemed to him of good augury: "Welcome! sir. You will help me to defend our friend."

Darcy asked no better, but the word *defend* was sufficient proof that the magistrate persisted in accusing Berthe, and Darcy doubted if he would allow him to plead for her. Before answering Madame Cambry, he looked at his uncle and saw a pleasant smile upon his lips, which reassured him. M. Roger extended his hand to him affectionately, and said: "I had declared to you that I would say nothing more to you about this sad affair; but at the point it has reached I have no longer anything to hide from you, for the investigation is almost finished. You can, therefore, hear what I have just been telling Madame Cambry, who, as you know, greatly interests herself in this unfortunate young girl."

"How could I help being interested in her?" exclaimed Madame Cambry. "I am sure she is innocent."

"Dear madame," continued the magistrate after a pause, "you might well excuse me from laying before you the reasons on which I base a certainty exactly opposite to yours. I should like to share your ideas; but what I have to say will prove to you that not even the semblance of a doubt remains as to the guilt of the party under suspicion. Yesterday I could still believe in an error based upon deceptive appearances. To-day I can no longer do so. I have material proofs."

"What are they? That Japanese poniard?"

"Others, much more conclusive. But I beg of you, dear madame, do not interrupt me. You wrote to me expressing a wish to see me, and to know the result of a decisive test to which Mademoiselle Lestérel has just been submitted. I have nothing to refuse to you, and I have come to tell you that this test has proved completely unfavourable to her. I shall be very grateful if you will ask me nothing further in regard to it."

"Madame Cambry hesitated a moment, but replied in a firm tone: "Pardon me for insisting. I wish to know all."

"So be it, then, my dear madame. I might argue that my professional duty was a motive for my silence; and if I thought myself acting contrary to it by informing you of what I have discovered, I should certainly keep silent, much as I desire to make myself agreeable to you. But I know of no bad result that can follow from telling you what took place this morning. We live in times in which the secrecy of investigations is no longer but an empty word, and the newspapers will to-morrow print at length what I am about to tell you, since you absolutely wish it. Yesterday, I questioned Julia d'Orcival's waiting-maid. This woman at once declared to me that, on last Tuesday, she carried a letter to Mademoiselle Lestérel from her mistress; that Mademoiselle Lestérel appeared much disturbed while reading this letter, and that she replied: 'Tell Madame d'Orcival that I will go.' Where? She did not state, but it was very natural to suppose that the ball at the opera house was in question. Why this appointment? On this point the waiting-maid was very explicit. And here, my dear Gaston," added M. Darcy, looking at his nephew, "I am obliged to warn you that you will learn some things which will afflict you. Nothing compels you to listen to them, and, if you feel that you have not the courage to hear them, Madame Cambry will certainly allow you to take leave of her."

"I thank you for your kindness, uncle; but I beg Madame Cambry, on the contrary, to authorise me to remain," replied Gaston.

"Very well, I have warned you. So much the worse for you, if I wound you in your most tender feelings. Madame Cambry will pardon me for entering into details which will lead her, I am afraid, to change her

opinion as regards Mademoiselle Lestérel. To resume my subject. The maid explained herself very clearly. She affirms that her mistress held some letters addressed by Mademoiselle Lestérel to a—to a man—letters which left no doubt as to the relations which had existed between this man and the young girl."

"The waiting-maid lies!" exclaimed Madame Cambry. "Berthe has always lived virtuously. Never has her conduct given occasion for the least suspicion."

To M. Roger Darcy's great astonishment, Gaston did not at all join in this vehement protestation. Gaston had reasons for being silent. He said to himself: "My uncle rests upon Mariette's statements. He takes them for proofs. When we demonstrate to him that these pretended proofs are without significance; that Mademoiselle Lestérel, if she went to the ball, went there to receive her sister's letters; that another woman entered the box, and that it was this other woman who struck Julia, my uncle will change his opinion. Meanwhile, I can let him talk on without contradicting him. All goes well."

"My first impression was the same as yours, dear madame," continued the magistrate. "I thought that the maid made her statement inconsiderately. She in vain assured me that she had seen Madame d'Orcival put a large package of letters in her pocket just as she was about to start for the ball. I only accepted her testimony, subject to ulterior verification, and it was to this verification that I proceeded this morning."

"How so?" asked Madame Cambry, quickly.

"I have myself directed the search which has just been made in Mademoiselle Lestérel's apartment."

"Well?"

"Well, I ought to say that I was at first very favourably impressed. It is rare that the condition of a dwelling, the objects which furnish it, do not somewhat indicate the character, habits, and morality of the person who occupies it. Furniture has a physiognomy. In the exercise of my functions, it has happened to me to scent a crime on entering the room of an assassin. On entering Mademoiselle Lestérel's apartment, however, it seemed to me that I was entering a nun's cell. A child's bedstead furnished with white muslin curtains; some straw-bottomed chairs; a walnut bureau; some first communion pictures; some twigs of consecrated box sticking in the frame of the mirror on the mantelshelf; a photograph of Commander Lestérel in uniform; a portrait of a woman, no doubt that of her elder sister. The only profane article of furniture was a piano with a pile of music on the top of it. No books but prize-books from a boarding-school, and some religious works."

"I was sure of it," murmured Madame Cambry.

"The drawers were opened, the papers examined minutely. My duty obliged me to do this. We only found some letters from her father."

"What did you say, then?"

"Will you please, dear madame, listen to me to the end? Every thing seemed to prove Mademoiselle Lestérel's innocence. A most modest wardrobe; a young girl's under-garments. No trace of a domino, a mask, or any other accessories indispensable for a masquerade ball. It is true that she could have hired these and have returned them the same night. I have ordered inquiries to be made of the costumiers and dealers in wearing apparel. I began to think that I had allowed myself to be entrapped by accusing appearances, when an unfortunate discovery spoiled every-

thing. The apartment is composed of five small rooms—an ante-room, a kitchen, a dining-room, a dressing-room, and a bedroom. There had been a fire in the bedroom, but it could be seen that none had ever been lighted in the dressing-room. No ashes or cinders on the hearth. Nothing but a pile of recently burnt paper—the letters returned by Madame d'Orcival, that is evident."

"Why evident?" asked Gaston.

"Very probable, at all events. It is easy to imagine the scene. Mademoiselle Lestérel returns from the ball. She holds the letters, and is in a hurry to destroy them. Her fire is out. She passes into her dressing-room to undress herself. She lights a candle, throws the package into the fireplace, sets fire to it, and watches over the incineration with great care, so that not a scrap of paper escapes the flame. If she had been arrested a few hours later, we should not have found a vestige of this *auto-da-fé*; but she had just risen when the commissary presented himself on my behalf, and she had not yet attended to her rooms."

"And it is on some impalpable remains, on some forgotten cinders in the depths of a fireplace, that a certitude is based!"

"Not at all. This discovery constituted a presumption, and nothing more. But another one was made. While carefully searching the bedroom fireplace, a detective found a letter, or rather a fragment of a letter, which had lodged itself in an interstice of the brickwork. Rapid combustion has its accidents. After the waiting-maid's departure, Mademoiselle Lestérel wished to burn Madame d'Orcival's invitation at once. The fire was in a blaze, she threw the letter into it, the flame had seized it, when the draught carried it away. The letter was on fashionable paper of the day, very thick, and, consequently, not easily burnt."

Madame Cambry listened to this narrative with impatient attention, and did not appear to put much faith in it. As for Gaston, he believed it, for he did not doubt but what Mariette had told the truth; still he was not so much alarmed, but even saw a gleam of hope. He thought to himself: "Julia, no doubt, wrote that the compromising letters came from Madame Crozon. If she wrote that on the fragment of the note which escaped the flames, Berthe will, at least, be freed of an infamous suspicion; justified in spite of herself; justified at her sister's expense—but what does that matter?"

"Unfortunately," continued M. Roger Darcy, "there only remained the last lines of the letter, but they are sufficiently clear."

"What did they say, then?" asked Madame Cambry, who seemed much moved.

"In the first place, they are signed: 'Julie Berthier,' Madame d'Orcival's real name; and this signature is preceded by this almost friendly qualification: 'Your former schoolfellow.' Then there can be no possible doubt as to the author of the letter, or the person to whom it was addressed."

"But that isn't all, I suppose," said Gaston, who seemed to be sitting on live coals.

"No. There was also this sentence, which I have retained word for word: 'I rely on your taking the trouble to disturb yourself. You can well risk your precious person at the opera house ball to obtain the nice love-letters I consent to return to you from pure goodness of soul, for I have but little reason to be pleased with you. Should you carry prudery so far as to refuse to come for them, I warn you that I shall no longer

consider myself bound to spare you in the least.' Is that sufficiently significant, dear madame?" asked M. Darcy, who had the delicacy not to address this terrible question to Gaston.

Madame Cambry was too much disturbed to reply categorically. She could only murmur: "It is strange, very strange."

"Alas! no," said Gaston to himself, "it is not sufficiently significant, for it is impossible to know whether the letters were Mademoiselle Lestérel's or her sister's."

"Next, before the final formula, came the number of the box and the time of the appointment," continued the uncle.

"And what was the time indicated?" asked the nephew, with inexpressible anxiety.

"Half-past two," replied the magistrate. "Now, the crime was committed at about three o'clock."

It would be difficult to tell which of the two, Gaston Darcy or Madame Cambry, was the most stricken with consternation by this precise declaration.

Gaston had clung to the idea suggested by Nointel, as a drowning man clings to a pole held out to him from the shore. In the present case the pole broke, and the lover sank into the depths of despair. He bowed his head and supported his forehead on his two hands.

Less overwhelmed, but more agitated, the beautiful widow seemed trying to read upon the severe face of the magistrate, whom she had chosen for her husband, the sentence with which human justice would infallibly strike the guilty one. It was there written, that dreadful sentence, and yet Madame Cambry did not renounce the defence of Berthe Lestérel. "At half-past two!" she exclaimed. "But it is impossible. Berthe left my house before midnight. She left it in great haste. Why should she have been in a hurry to leave if the appointment made by Madame d'Orcival had been fixed for half-past two?"

"You forget, my dear madame, that a woman came for her—a woman who claimed to be in Madame Crozon's service."

"But who was certainly not in Madame d'Orcival's service. That is an additional proof that Mademoiselle Lestérel did not go to the ball."

"No, it is an unexplained fact, nothing else. This woman has not been found up to the present. She is being sought for, however, and will be found. I have no doubt of it. If the prisoner has refused to designate her, it is evidently because she fears her testimony."

"And so," exclaimed Madame Cambry, sorrowfully, "you believe this unfortunate child to be ruined."

"Ruined in reputation, alas! yes—she is that already. Condemned she will be. But, as I have already told Gaston, I am certain that the jury and the court will take pity on her."

"That no doubt signifies that her head will not fall—that she will be sentenced to imprisonment for life. What a terrible consolation! Is not death better for her than a convict prison for life?—and it is to a convict prison that her judges' indulgence will send her."

M. Roger Darcy, visibly affected, had some trouble in bringing himself to reply: "She will be placed in one of the prisons for women, and probably not for life—for twenty years—for ten years perhaps, if the court consents to lower the penalty by two degrees. The law allows it to do so."

"Ten years!" repeated Madame Cambry—"ten years of frightful

torture. I have been told that the women shut up in these hells are unable to endure it—that those who survive become mad.”

This time the magistrate did not reply at all.

“You are silent,” she exclaimed; “it is then true: women die there, they lose their reason—and that will be the fate reserved for an innocent girl! for Berthe is innocent. I swear it. Ah! it is dreadful to think of! Tell me at least—tell me, I supplicate you, that she will be promptly pardoned.”

M. Darcy shook his head, and said with profound emotion: “You would do wrong, madame, to hope for that. No doubt, Mademoiselle Lestérel would still seem worthy of interest even after her condemnation. But her trial will cause enormous excitement. By her education and her connections she belongs to the upper classes of society. An immediate commutation of her punishment would shock public opinion. The newspapers would cry out at the injustice. The Chief of the State can pardon a working-woman without being accused of partiality. But he is almost compelled to show himself merciless to a woman of fashionable society.”

This was too much for Gaston. He rose, shook Madame Cambry's hand warmly and escaped, leaving his uncle to talk alone with the generous widow who was weeping bitterly. “No,” he murmured, dashing down the staircase, “no, Berthe shall not go to die in one of those infamous prisons. What matter these letters, these coincidences of time! She isn't guilty, I see it! I feel it—and I will prove it—or if not, then it is I who will die—I will blow my brains out.”

His “duke” awaited him. He threw himself into it, and it was a great miracle that he did not run over somebody on his way home, for he drove down the Avenue des Champs-Élysées with the rapidity of an express train.

X.

THE hour indicated by Mariette had passed when the captain reached the church of Saint-Augustin to attend Julia d'Orcival's funeral.

It was not exactly a pious duty that he came to fulfil, for Julia had never inspired him with much sympathy. She displeased him for several reasons; in the first place, because she had seized upon Gaston Darcy, to lead him at break-neck speed along the road to ruin; and next, because she belonged to a category of fast women that he could not endure. Her grand airs had irritated him, her pretensions appeared to him ridiculous, and he had often mocked at Darcy, who submitted to certain of Julia's exactions. For instance, she was not willing that her lover should address her familiarly in the second person singular; the obedient Gaston addressed her as “you,” even in private, and saluted her before the public as he would have saluted Madame Cambry. This obstinate hussar was behind the times in his ideas; he still believed in the women sung by Béranger, and almost regretted the extinct race of *grisettes*.

Thus he did not feel called upon to be moved by the premature death of a governess who had become a millionaire by the grace of her charms, and curiosity alone attracted him to the obsequies of the proud d'Orcival—an interested curiosity, for he hoped to gather some useful indications during the ceremony.

He very much doubted meeting any of his acquaintances there; but,

out of consideration for his friend, whom he almost represented, he had carefully dressed himself in an appropriate costume—a long black overcoat, a black cashmere hat, black gloves and cravat. He would not have dressed differently had he gone to bury the Marchioness de Barancos.

However, he did not have to regret having made a correct toilet, for the people present were as select as they were numerous. Twenty private carriages stood in front of the church, and the hangings of the portal announced to the passers-by that a “first-class” * funeral was in progress. “Oh! oh!” said Nointel to himself, on perceiving this pomp from the distance; “no more would be done for a general of division. At whose expense is this sumptuous funeral taking place? I can’t divine. The State, which inherits Julia’s property, is not usually so generous. Can her former gentlemen friends have clubbed together? Little streams make large rivers. At ten louis a head they could have everything of the best in the way of funeral pomp. Ah! it is fortunate that Darcy has not come. It would have certainly been said that it was he who paid for all this mortuary luxury, and his uncle wouldn’t have been pleased.”

On entering the church, Nointel found the nave crowded, and he noted that if women were in the majority, men were not lacking. There were some of the elegant idlers, those who go to a funeral which makes a stir as they would go to a first performance; a few who professed the religion of remembrance, who had come in memory of a passing connection with Julia, and a corps of newspaper reporters, for the account of the obsequies would no doubt make at least a column and a half of copy, which was certainly not too much for the victim of the crime at the opera house.

The church was draped in black from top to bottom, and the coffin was lost to view under the flowers. There were some bouquets of white camellias which must have cost fully a hundred crowns.

“One month of a captain’s pay,” thought Nointel, philosophically.

And all these saunterers, all these indifferent spectators, all these fast men, all these women who doted upon pleasure had an edifying attitude. If the men chatted a little, they did so in a low voice; while as for the women, they prayed. The organ thundered out its bursts of harmony, and the stern chants of the burial service re-echoed from the arched roof.

Nointel took his seat in the last row of chairs, quite at the end of the nave. He was much more anxious to see than to be seen, and he began searching to find out if he could recognise any one in the throng. The men scarcely showed him aught but their backs, but the women presented their profiles to him, and he soon discovered some stars of the fast world. Julia’s female friends were weeping, and among them the captain noticed Claudine Rissler, with whom he had been acquainted in days gone by. She was an exceedingly pretty woman—a merry brunette; one of those creatures whom one cannot look at without thinking of drinking champagne and breaking the glasses afterwards, a woman after Nointel’s own heart, and he was not a little surprised to see that she was in tears.

“She nevertheless pitilessly ruined three worthy fellows of my acquaintance,” said the most sceptical of ex-officers to himself. “Two forced enlistments in the Chasseurs d’Afrique and a suicide which did not cost her a sigh. It is perhaps because she has hitherto been so sparing of her tears that she now has so many to shed.”

* French funerals are divided into “classes,” according to the amount of show and the expense incurred. The pauper’s funeral stands last and tenth upon the list. There are, therefore, plenty of varieties to choose from.—*Trans.*

Claudine was flanked by a gentleman, the only one who had mixed himself with the persons of the weaker sex; a tall individual with but little hair on his head, a pair of moustaches which were turning grey, and whiskers cut in the Russian style; a stiff, serious gentleman like a diplomat in reception dress. Nointel concluded that this personage was the boyard who now protected the captivating Rissler. He admired her tact in having persuaded this Muscovite nobleman to honour Julie Berthier's funeral by his presence.

He also recognised Mariette, who wiped her eyes as soon as she perceived him, and made him a little sign of recognition. He had some further information to ask of her, and decided to talk to her after the service. Meantime he continued examining the female portion of the audience, and in the most obscure corner of the church, quite outside of the party which occupied the chairs, he espied a woman kneeling upon the stone pavement. He could barely see her, for a holy-water font half concealed her from him. He was able, however, to see that she wore an elegant mourning toilet, and was astonished that so well dressed a person should be ignorant of the use of a praying-desk or should disdain to make use of it. Of her face, he could say nothing, for she hid it under a thick veil; but he could judge from her figure that she was young and well formed. She prayed ardently, bent over like a penitent, and from certain movements of her shoulders, one would have said that she was sobbing.

A strange idea presented itself to the captain's awakened intelligence. He had read in some judicial romances that murderers have a natural tendency to prowl about the scene of their crime, and even to go to the Morgue to view the body of their victim. He did not put much confidence in these statements of authors who work up celebrated cases, but set to reasoning by analogy, and said to himself: "Suppose it was the culprit who repents and who has come to ask pardon of the dead? Why not? Julia was certainly killed by a woman, and women are capable of all eccentricities. I shall try to get nearer to this one. She will certainly get up at some time or other, and I have good eyes; I shall be unfortunate if I do not succeed in seeing the colour of hers."

He was about to put this praiseworthy project into execution, but the service was approaching its close, and there was a great movement in the crowd which began retreating back towards the sides of the church so as to make room for the clergy and others connected with the funeral procession.

The captain was punished for his carelessness. Degenerating from his military habits of punctuality, he had arrived late and had missed one half of the service. Finding it now impossible to cross the nave and pass into the female camp without attracting the attention of his neighbours, some of whom knew him by sight, he resigned himself to watching the stranger from a distance, fully intending to join her on going out.

She still prayed, and moved no more than do the kneeling statues on the tombs of the middle ages in old cathedrals. New faces now turned Nointel's attention from the curious spectacle of this disconsolate female. The audience had already commenced to file past the coffin, and among the first to sprinkle holy-water upon Julia's flower-strewn bier, the indefatigable observer saw Simancas and Saint-Galmier.

"I can no longer go anywhere without meeting those two rogues," he muttered. "What have they come here for? They can't regret Julia, if her death has procured them admission into the marchioness's mansion.

But I would just as soon they didn't see me, and I will get out of their way."

Nointel drew back to the third rank, and placed himself in such a way as not to be seen by those who went out. He saw the general and the doctor pass; the inevitable Lolif, and several others, who did not notice him; then came the women, Claudine Rissler at their head, still escorted by her majestic boyard. The church was rapidly emptying itself, but the strange woman made no signs of rising.

"So much fervour and a richly made dress—a dress in to-morrow's style, that isn't natural," said the captain to himself. "It is only in Spain and in Italy that fine ladies dispense with chairs in praying to God. A Parisian lady would be afraid of grazing her knees, and especially of spoiling her toilet. In Spain! Ah! but Madame de Barancos is Spanish. Suppose it should be she? That's something that would be significant. Dash it all! I will find out about it. I will wait at the church-door, and, if necessary, follow her."

Nointel, making his way through the crowd, tried to reach the door, but those who were carrying the coffin barred his way. He was obliged to let them pass, and had the grief of seeing the kneeling woman finally rise to her feet, glide towards a side door, and disappear. Scarcely had he time enough to notice her height and figure, which agreed sufficiently well with the idea he had in his head. From that, to concluding with certainty that the stranger was Madame de Barancos was a long stride, and the captain did not hesitate to hasten after her to know what to think about it.

He left the nave as quickly as he was able, but the door was blocked, and when he reached the steps the veiled woman had quite vanished. He in vain looked in every direction, ran to the corner of the Boulevard Malesherbes, and then, retracing his steps, went in the direction of the Square Delaborde, on the other side of the church; however, he could see nothing of her. Evidently a carriage had awaited her, and had taken her rapidly away. That at least was what Nointel thought, and he said to himself: "An additional reason for supposing it to be the marchioness. She has good horses, and is already far away. I will note the incident, and when I see her, which will be soon, I shall not forget to speak to her about Julia's funeral."

With this resolution the captain was preparing to go off so as to avoid inopportune meetings, but he felt that he was being pulled by the sleeve of his overcoat, and on turning round, found himself face to face with Claudine Rissler, who said to him: "Good morning, Henry. It was nice of you to come, but your friend Darcy is a heartless man. He might very well have put himself out a little for Julia. And to let a stranger pay her funeral expenses, when he has an income of fifty thousand francs—no, truly, that isn't pretty. After all, I am just as well pleased that he didn't charge himself with them; he would have been stingy, and we have not looked at the expense. Wasn't it nice?"

"It could not be better, but——"

"Excuse me if I leave you, but Wladimir is looking for me; Wladimir is coming. Do you wish me to introduce him to you? He is as jealous as a bear of his native land, but you will see how I tame him. No? You don't care for it? Then I return to my Cossack. I will tell him that I was chatting with my cousin."

The captain was going to protest, for he did not care to have Claudine

call him cousin. But she was already hooked on to the arm of the Russian noble, whom she was dragging towards her carriage. She walked as fast as she talked. The colloquy had not lasted thirty seconds, and the fugue lasted no longer. Nointel could have laughed heartily at the disjointed talk of this hare brained damsel, but the moment would have been badly chosen. The coffin which contained poor Julia's remains was being placed in a plumed hearse, and the ex-hussar's scepticism did not go to the extent of rendering him inaccessible to all emotion. He listened to the dull sound made by the oaken bier as it grated upon the planks of the mortuary vehicle, and caught himself feeling a regret for this queen of beauty, who was about to sleep forgotten under six feet of ground. The last time he had seen her was at the door of her mansion; she was entering her famous eight-sprunged victoria, the same that Madame de Barancos envied her. She was starting for her drive in the Bois, and the passers-by turned round to admire her. And now, this was her last journey, the journey from which none return. Nothing more than a name on a stone, and scarcely a remembrance more quickly effaced even than the inscription. Finally, the grass grows around, and the name vanishes in turn.

"Bah!" said the captain to himself, a little ashamed to have allowed himself to philosophise on so melancholy a subject; "she has died in the full splendour of youth and success. She hasn't had the sorrow of seeing herself grow old. It is as though I had been killed on the battlefield, a colonel at thirty years of age. And I should have been placed in the trench with far less ceremony."

He had reached this point in his reflections, when he was approached by Mariette. The crafty waiting-maid had not lost sight of him on going out, and had waited for him to be alone to speak to him.

"Wasn't it nice, sir?" she said to him, wiping her eyes with a cambric handkerchief which had no doubt formerly been used by her mistress.

"They all say the same thing," thought Nointel; "it seems to be a refrain." And he replied gravely: "Admirable and affecting. I am quite moved by it."

"I thought Monsieur Darcy was coming," continued the maid.

"It is I who advised him to remain at home. I know him. He is very nervous. He wouldn't have been able to hold out to the end. But tell me, did you notice a woman dressed in mourning, kneeling on the slabs to the left of the nave?"

"Yes—she went out by the little door and got into a cab."

"You are sure it was a cab?"

"Oh! quite sure. I had noticed her in church."

"Do you know her?"

"No, but I have an idea that she is a woman of fashionable society."

"I, too, but I ask myself what she came here for."

"To pray God for madame, that's sure, and there's nothing astonishing about it. Madame Julia had often obliged persons who have not boasted of it. See here! once, last year, a lady who did not know her wrote to ask her for six thousand francs—a debt at Worth's which she did not wish to acknowledge to her husband; and a real lady, if you please, a baroness—Madame lent the six thousand francs, and never saw them again."

"Do you know the name of that baroness?"

"Madame Julia did not tell it me. She was very discreet."

"Did you notice in what direction the cab went?" asked Nointel, who

was still thinking of the marchioness, for he little believed in fashionable women borrowing money from Julia d'Orcival."

"Yes. It went off towards the Madeleine."

"Madame de Barancos lives in the Rue de Monceau," thought Nointel. "That isn't the road."

"Excuse me, captain," continued Mariette; "there is the *cortège* starting; I am obliged to leave you, for, as you may well suppose, I am going to the cemetery. And if I dared—I would ask you to come there—because, you see, of all these gentlemen who are here there will only be Madame Rissler's Russian—well, that's easily understood, since—but I should be very glad if a gentleman would have the kindness to accompany madame's body to the end. Think that she has not a single relation to sprinkle holy-water upon her at the last moment, not a male friend—nothing but some female friends—unmarried—so that if you would take the place of Monsieur Darcy, who is too nervous—well, it would be a good deed."

Nointel reflected a little. The proposition did not charm him much, but he thought he discerned a true sentiment in the regrets expressed by Mariette, and he troubled himself exceedingly little in regard to the opinion of people who might find fault with his conduct. He was, besides, anxious to be on good terms with the maid, for he had not finished questioning her in regard to her defunct mistress's connections.

"You are right," he said with an air of decision. "Poor Julia must not go without me. Darcy will thank me for not having abandoned her. Let us go together. You have a cab?"

"Yes, captain; but I should never have dared to propose to you——"

"To make the journey with you. Why not? Do you imagine that I have any prejudices? Besides, I should be lonely all by myself. You will tell me some stories on the way. I have a pile of things to ask of you. Where is your cab?"

"At two steps from here, Monsieur Nointel. You are very kind, and I am very glad. Ah! if madame sees you from up above——"

"Let us hurry, my girl," interrupted Nointel, to curtail the sentimental utterance he foresaw. "The procession is already moving off. Let us fall into the line."

The line was very long, and Mariette had been right in her conjectures as to what would happen. All the men had decamped with the exception of a conscientious reporter, intelligent and thin, who, no doubt, belonged to the staff of the *Figaro*. There now only remained but the broughams of Julia's female friends, and the landau of Claudine's boyard—the broughams lined with satin to match the colour of the ladies' horses, and adorned with mirrors, like apartments; and the landau a massive and deep affair in which Claudine's slender person disappeared as though she had been plunged into an immense bath-tub. This imposing landau headed the line which terminated with a few cabs, containing maids, milliners, dressmakers, hairdressers, and all those subaltern folks who had lived upon Madame d'Orcival, and were anxious to prove that gratitude is not banished from the hearts of their class. The cab in which Nointel and Mariette had taken their places came last of all.

"Where are we going, then?" asked the captain.

"To Père-Lachaise cemetery. Madame Rissler would have preferred Montmartre, because that is more convenient for her, as she lives in the Rue de Lisbonne; but she had no choice. The stranger had bought the ground at Père-Lachaise."

"The stranger ! What stranger ? But, in the first place, tell me who has paid for this funeral. It isn't the State, I suppose."

"Oh, dear no. Would you believe it—those beggarly officials wanted to order one of the sixth-class ? Madame, who leaves them more than a million, would have been buried like the wife of a grocer in the suburbs. Fortunately Madame Rissler had more heart than them."

"What ! It is Claudine who has borne the expense ?"

"Yes, captain ; that is to say, the money came out of her Russian's pocket ; but that amounts to the same thing. Ah ! Madame Rissler has a heart," exclaimed Mariette, striking her bosom. "She washed Madame Julia's remains, and dressed her, and placed her in the coffin. And then, if you had heard how she talked to her Russian: 'Wladimir, I am going to send to the mayoralty of the eighth arrondissement to order my friend's funeral. Give me ten thousand francs. If ten thousand don't suffice, you will be called upon for the remainder.'"

"And he gave them ?"

"Without faltering. Oh ! she holds him. And he walks at a sign of her finger or eye. It remains to be seen though if he will walk long, for foreigners, you see—they can't be relied upon. They throw roubles out of the windows during six months, and then some fine day they fly away like the swallows do in autumn. And that is why Madame Rissler is deserving of praise for what she has done, for, in fact——"

"Julia buried at the expense of Russia, how curious it is !" said the captain. "She always dreamt of marrying a Muscovite prince ; she loved a Pole. It was written that the Slavs should be mixed up in her life and her death."

"What is still more curious is what follows. Just fancy that at the mayor's office the clerk told Madame Rissler's valet that the burial-ground for Madame d'Orcival had been bought and paid for since the morning. By whom ? By one of Madame Julia's lady friends—a lady friend, self-styled. She gave a name which no one had ever heard of. Madame Julia had no relations, and the proof of it is that no one has claimed the inheritance. It can't be understood."

"It is a woman who did that ?" asked Nointel quickly.

"Yes, captain. Madame Rissler went to the office to find out what it meant. There she was told that the person did not look rich. And yet she paid cash for a grant in fee, and a two thousand franc grant, if you please."

"Of course ; she did not give it out of her pocket. She was acting on her mistress' account. She was a waiting-maid."

"Madame Rissler had the same idea as you. But whose waiting-maid ? One of madame's friends wouldn't have hid herself to buy a plot of ground. And what is still more funny, is that she was not willing to pay for the funeral. The woman replied to the clerk that the State would see to that. It seems too that that made a difficulty, because it isn't customary to buy the grant separately. But the officials eventually took the money all the same. Madame Rissler had two thousand francs left of her Russian's money, and madame will be buried at Père-Lachaise. What do you say to all that, Monsieur Nointel ?"

"What the deuce would you have me say about it ? It proves that Julia had more than one good friend, unless the woman of fashionable society of whom you spoke just now thought of that means of acquitting herself in part of the six thousand francs Julia had lent her."

The captain did not believe a word of what he was saying. He thought that this singular generosity savoured somewhat of the Spanish marchioness; that Madame de Barancos had had her reasons for thus acting, which he readily divined, and that something was always to be learned by chatting with Mariette.

"Yes," he said to himself, "it is the marchioness who did that; I would swear to it. I feel it, I see it. I could write the story of her actions during these last three days as though I had witnessed them. On Sunday morning she killed Julia at the ball at the opera house. She killed her in a fit of anger. A woman like her doesn't premeditate a murder, but she commits it readily when the blood flies to her head. She returned home greatly excited. She perceived that she had lost a sleeve-button, and this discovery did not reassure her, on the contrary. Simancas arrived and declared to her that he had recognised her when she appeared in the box. He proposed to sell his silence, and she was obliged to submit to his conditions. On Sunday night she had the courage to go to the opera house to show herself. Simancas pursued her, found her as she went out, and imposed his rascal of a friend upon her. On Monday she was full of remorse. She only thought of expiation. It occurred to her mind that it would be as well to assure Madame d'Orcival a burial-place of her choice—a place to which she could go and plant flowers and weep. I will bet that she chose it in the most solitary corner of Père-Lachaise. She didn't think of paying the funeral expenses, because she had been told that the State, which inherits, would take charge of them; and she imagined that the State would do so in a becoming manner. She has in her service a *confidante*, some *duenna* who has been her nurse, who has never left her, and possesses all her secrets. It is necessary that I should discover this *confidante*. That will not be very difficult, since I have now my entrance to the marchioness's. And, then, this *duenna* must have a Spanish accent, and that must have been noticed at the burial office. Still another item of information to obtain. The ground being paid for, the marchioness already feels herself relieved a little. She takes a drive in the Bois de Boulogne, in her gala equipage. She wishes to be seen everywhere. Unfortunately, Simancas exacts that she shall take him with her. Mustn't she execrate that Peruvian! I am sure that she would give the half of her fortune to whoever would rid her of him. I shall naturally not render her that service. I rely a great deal on Simancas. He will finish by exasperating her to such a degree that she will do something giddy. She has already commenced doing so. She knew that Madame d'Orcival was to be buried this morning. She could not control herself. She decided to go to Saint-Augustin so that she might see the coffin in which she had laid Julia; that she might do penance within ten steps of the corpse; and she imagines that by hurting her knees on the flooring of the church, she makes a little restitution for her crime. She has no doubt founded some masses. And to-night she will go to the Théâtre Français in her *proscenium* box, for Tuesday is one of the two fashionable nights. Is that Spanish enough? A Parisian lady, under similar circumstances, wouldn't have remained within five hundred leagues of the city. But a Parisian lady doesn't play with a knife. I most certainly have a hold on Madame de Barancos. Mademoiselle Lestérel will owe me a fine taper. And I had a famous idea in coming to this funeral."

"Ah! captain," signed Mariette, "how sad it is to lose so good a mistress! You are sorry, that's seen, but you can't be as sorry as I am.

Think ! to have lived so long with some one who charged herself with my future, and then to find myself on the pavement."

"You will not be left there, my girl."

"Then, you think that Monsieur Darcy——"

"I don't think he will buy you a shop and stock within forty-eight hours. Darcy is somewhat embarrassed just now. Madame d'Orcival cost him a deal of money. And he is obliged to study his uncle. But be easy ; he will not forget you. Besides, I am there to refresh his memory. And you must have saved something while in Julia's service which will enable you to wait."

"Oh ! very little, Monsieur Nointel. Madame wasn't close-fisted, but she knew how to count. I have put hardly anything by ; and if I were to be out of a place only for six months——"

"Why shouldn't you go to Claudine's ?"

"Madame Rissler has a waiting-maid—one of not much account, it's true, but she stays there. And then, you see, captain, Madame Rissler's house isn't a sure one. To-day, they roll in gold there ; but no one knows what might happen to-morrow."

"Yes, I understand—there are the soldiers—Claudine may betray Russia for a pretty sub-lieutenant. No matter. The place cannot be a bad one just now. A nobleman who lets ten thousand francs go as I would part with five louis is a mine to be worked, and Claudine understands it. I will recommend you to her. I want to see her to talk to her about this story of the purchase of a plot of ground——"

Nointel stopped himself in the middle of his sentence. He said to himself that it was useless to let the waiting-maid see to what an extent this little mystery interested him. Mariette, however, did not take up the allusion to the stranger who has been anxious to endow Madame d'Orcival with a grant in fee. She launched out into thanks, and did not refuse the captain's protection. The conversation became less interesting, but did not languish, for the maid was a character ; and Nointel was not sorry to gather details in any way concerning Julia's habits and connections. Thus the time did not seem to him particularly long, although the distance between Saint-Augustin and Père-Lachaise is by no means short.

When the time came to alight from the cab at the entrance of the cemetery, he had no need to tell Mariette that he wished to walk alone. Mariette was a well-trained girl who knew how to keep her place. She went of her own accord to join the women of her class, and Nointel resumed his liberty of action. He made use of it in the first place to observe the faithful ones who had accompanied the funeral procession.

The spectacle was a strange one. Everything is known in Paris, and the rumour had spread in this distant neighbourhood that the victim of the crime at the opera house was to be buried at Père-Lachaise. There was a crowd there—a crowd of workmen, petty dealers, and women belonging to the neighbourhood. These people did not even know Madame d'Orcival by name, but they had read an account of the event in some halfpenny newspaper, and had come there just as they would have gone to the Morgue had the body been exposed there. The majority did not suspect the rank held by the defunct in the class she belonged to, and they opened their eyes wide on seeing a magnificent hearse arrive, followed by a long line of equipages. There were some malevolent comments on this posthumous luxury ; but the bearing of the female friends of the

deceased was so becoming, their grief appeared to be so sincere, that the public soon grew sympathetic. And, in fact, the most honest woman in the world could not have been accompanied to her last resting-place by a more decent escort. No one would have suspected but what these pretty women who bravely followed on foot behind the hearse were virtuous mothers of families. Not a showy piece of ribbon, not an eccentric hat, not an article of jewellery. Nothing but dark toilets and afflicted faces.

Claudine Rissler led the way with the boyard, who had a superb bearing. Delphine de Raincy, Jeanne Norbert, Cora Darling, Gabrielle Bernard, and many other stars of the first magnitude, formed the line of battle. The band of soubrettes and tradeswomen constituted an important rearguard; and the thin reporter skirmished on the flanks of the column.

Nointel contented himself with following at a distance, being content to approach at the last moment. The procession had turned to the left and slowly ascended by a road which winds round the hillside. The immense panorama of Paris unrolled itself little by little before the captain's eyes. Smoke whirled in the air, the smoke of the great human factory. Seen from the summit of this silent height, Paris resembled an immense boiler in ebullition, and the least poetic mind was struck by the contrast.

"All roads lead to Rome," thought Nointel, looking at the cupola of the opera house which emerged in the distance above a sea of houses. "On leaving for the ball, Julia little suspected that she would so soon reach Père-Lachaise. But I am curious to see where she is to be lodged in this city of the dead. Not in a frequented part, that I'll bet. Madame de Barancos no doubt gave her duenna precise instructions. And who knows but what I am going to discover the sensitive marchioness prowling about near the grave? If she has committed this imprudence, I will so manage it, that she shan't escape me, as she did at church."

At the end of the ascent, the hearse took a cross-road, which, on one side, bordered innumerable tombs of modest appearance, and on the other a vast uncultivated field, in the midst of which stretched a long, open trench. To the right the woods formed an enclosure, and here and there were iron railings, scarcely upheld in the stony soil. To the left a forest of crosses was huddled close together, just as had been the case in this world—where room is lacking for them—with the poor people, whose graves they marked; wretched crosses, half uprooted by the wind, that wind from Paris which blows forgetfulness over the dead.

"We are not there yet," said the captain to himself. "That's the common grave and the temporary grants. Madame d'Orcival will not repose in this neighbourhood."

The hearse advanced towards two rows of eypresses; the earth was soaked by the constant rainfalls of an abominable winter. It was wonderful to see with what courage Julia's elegant friends pattered in the mud. It was certainly more trying to these sinners to paddle thus, than it is for pilgrim sailors to climb barefooted the hill of Notre-Dame-de-Grâce.

Finally the procession stopped at the end of the road, near the wall which marks the eastern limit of this field of the dead. There were there only some tombs, twenty-five years old—an age in Paris—tombs no longer visited, and which the brambles commenced to cover. Nointel had guessed rightly. Julia was to lie for ever in the darkest and most forsaken corner of the cemetery. A vacant spot occurred among all these abandoned

monuments, and this spot had probably been chosen intentionally. You could pray there without being disturbed, and even without being seen, for a thick screen of gloomy trees separated it from the road.

The "master of the ceremonies," who looked as grave and as solemn as a magistrate, arranged those present, who were now less numerous, for the ascent was long and severe, and many indifferent ones had fallen behind. There remained but such as were devoted to the last hour, and a few intrepid curious ones who were anxious to see all. Nointel did not have much trouble in placing himself as he pleased, near enough to lose nothing of the supreme episode, and to examine the faces of the bystanders; but he looked on all sides in vain, he did not perceive any veiled woman. On the other hand he saw five or six "irregulars" fall upon their knees at the edge of the grave, without stopping to think that they were soiling their thirty louis' dresses in the mire.

"Respectable women of the middle-classes would think more about it," he thought, while admiring this transport on the part of the "irregulars." "And these young ladies are not acting a comedy; I know them. They mourn for Julia from the heart—for Julia whom they loved but little when she crushed them by her luxury."

Claudine Rissler, especially, sobbed enough to melt one's soul; and when the ropes grated against the coffin, as it was lowered into the grave, she sank down in a heap, and Wladimir advanced opportunely to raise her up. The captain had nothing more to do there. He had sufficiently shown himself, so that it could not be said that poor Julia d'Orcival had only been accompanied by women of her class and a Muscovite. He even feared that he had shown himself too much, for he perceived that the conscientious reporter was taking notes. He thought, therefore, that it was time to beat a retreat, and he was slowly going away, without noticing a woman who had been behind him, and who now started to follow him. At the edge of the road this woman joined him, and exclaimed:

"Excuse me if I stop you, sir. I wish to ask you something."

Nointel, somewhat surprised, looked at her, and saw that he had not to deal with a fashionable young lady, a milliner, or a maid. The woman who spoke to him belonged to the masses; she was a buxom creature, of about thirty years of age, whose face glowed with health and good-nature. She was simply but cleanly dressed, and although she did not appear to be timid, she was much embarrassed.

"Whatever you please," said the captain so as to encourage her, for he scented some unlooked-for information.

"This is the funeral of the lady who was killed at the opera house?"

"Yes, my good woman. Did you know that lady?"

"I! Oh! no, sir. But you were one of her friends, since you came to the cemetery, and you could perhaps tell me if it is true what is told in the papers."

"What? That she was assassinated? Nothing could be truer."

"Yes, but they also say that she was assassinated by a woman."

"That is also true. How does that interest you?"

"What interests me is to know if this woman is a young lady—a young lady named Mademoiselle Lestérel."

Nointel little expected to hear this name spoken within two steps of Madame d'Orcival's tomb, and by a woman who most certainly did not visit the drawing-rooms where poor Berthe had but lately sung. He had

sufficient control over himself, however, to hide his astonishment, and he replied in the quietest way imaginable: "The newspapers, indeed, state that the crime was committed by a young girl named Lestérel."

"And who lives in the Rue de Ponthieu, close to the Champs-Élysées?" asked the woman with a certain amount of hesitation.

"That is said to be her residence."

"Has she been arrested, this young lady?"

"Yes, on the day before yesterday, in the morning. It seems that proofs were obtained against her at once."

"Then she is in prison?"

"Of course!"

"In what prison?"

"At Saint-Lazare. There is no other prison for women in Paris."

"And she is going to be left there?"

"Until she passes before the assizes."

"The assizes!—then she will be tried—and she will be condemned perhaps."

"That is very probable."

"Ah, my God! I shall never see her again," murmured the buxom woman.

"And that grieves you, I see. She is a relative of yours then?"

"Oh! no, sir. I am only a working woman, and this young lady——"

"But you know her, at least?"

"I know her without being acquainted with her. I have—yes, I have worked for her—and she owes me some money. I am not rich—so that I should like to know if I can still hope to be paid; I live in the neighbourhood. I saw the funeral pass, and I came——"

"In search of information, I can understand that. But it will be better for you to address yourself to the examining magistrate. He will tell you exactly how matters stand."

"To the magistrate! ah! there is no danger of my going to see him," exclaimed the woman; and then recollecting herself: "The amount isn't worth the trouble of disturbing him."

The captain had his mind constantly on the alert, and from the very beginning of this dialogue he had decided to listen attentively to this applicant for information, and to draw from her all she could tell him. What had followed had increased his curiosity and had even awakened his suspicions. He realised that he was talking with a person who must be more or less mixed up in Berthe Lestérel's affairs, for he did not believe in this story of a debt at all. And he wished to clear up matters. "I bet that you are a laundress," he said, laughing.

"No—that is to say, this is how it is: I have a brother who is a laundryman at Pantin—he has worked for this young lady—and he had charged me to——"

"To claim what this young lady owes him; that's quite natural," interrupted Nointel, who, on the contrary, thought that nothing was less natural in the world.

"But I give it up," continued the self-styled working-woman. "We prefer to lose a little money than to run after our dues. And then the young girl has quite sorrow enough without our going to torment her still more."

"There is a way of arranging everything. I don't know her, but I know some one who knows her, who, indeed, takes a great interest in her,

and who would pay you very willingly. Tell me where you live. The person would call on you."

"No—no. You are very kind, sir, but it is useless—they would never find me—I am never at home—seeing that I am out working from morning till night."

"Then nothing prevents you from coming to see me. Here is my address," said Nointel, taking a card from his pocket-book.

The woman at first looked as though she did not wish to take it. She decided to do so, however, when she saw that the captain was going to place it in her hand whether or no. But the last shovelful of dirt had just fallen upon Julia d'Orcival's coffin; the people present fell back to the roadway, and the woman took advantage of the opportunity to mingle with the crowd, but not without muttering a few excuses and thanks.

Nointel could not persist in talking to her before all these people, but he at first manoeuvred in such a way as not to lose sight of her, and asked himself if he would not do well to follow her. "That creature knows more about matters than she admits," he thought; "and she no more has a brother who is a laundryman than she herself is a working-woman. She looks like a nurse. What connection can there have been between her and Mademoiselle Lestérel? It isn't she who will inform me, for she must have important reasons for keeping silent. If I should dog her steps she will so arrange it as to put me off the track, and I shall not discover where she lives. And then, too, she will mistrust me and I shall never see her again, whereas by leaving her alone I can hope that she will some day come to see me. Decidedly, there is nothing to be done in that direction to-day; I should lose my time, and I can employ it much better in going presently to see Madame de Barancos."

With this resolution, he quickened his step without further troubling himself about the stranger who carried away his visiting-card. He was anxious not to meet Julia's female friends, who all knew him, and who would not have failed to accost him and talk with him about the ceremony. He allowed them to descend by the road taken by the hearse, while he himself cut along some paths so as to reach the gate of the cemetery more quickly; and he outstripped all the others by taking this course. He found the broughams belonging to the women, and Wladimir's landau drawn up in a line on the boulevard. But the inquisitive ones had dispersed, and everything had returned to its customary orderly aspect. Opposite the great gateway stretched the Rue de la Roquette, bordered with tombstones for sale and with the wares of the dealers in crosses, wreaths, and other funeral mementoes. The trees of the open space, where criminals are guillotined, could be seen half way down the thoroughfare, and, much nearer, there were two or three wine-shops, patronised by the afflicted who believe in alcoholising their grief.

Nointel was about to go in search of a cab to take him home, when, in front of one of these wine-shops, he perceived a man whose aspect awakened a dim recollection in his mind. This individual was seated at a little round table alone with a bottle, and, to judge by his dress, he was not a workman.

"It is strange," said the captain to himself, looking at the man attentively, and slowly approaching him; "one would swear it were he; and yet what would he be doing here, unless he, too, was attracted by Julia's funeral? It is absolutely necessary that I should know what to

think about it. If accident has brought him in my way, it would be a piece of good luck. Let us take a nearer view of this."

He crossed the road slowly, stopped before a marble cutter's display, and, while pretending to inspect the tombstones, the urns, and broken columns, he examined the solitary drinker. He was a man of about forty years of age, thick set, and broad-shouldered, and having a somewhat surly face. His hair and goatee were getting very grey. His face was sunburnt—might almost be said to be tanned—for it had nearly the colour of leather. He had heavy, bush-like eyebrows, deep-set grey eyes, a powerful nose, thick lips, and a most prominent chin. His dress was wanting in elegance. He wore a soft hat and an ample overcoat, buttoned to his neck and falling to his boots. He had, indeed, pretty nearly the look and dress adopted by the old soldiers of the First Empire under the Restoration.

"He has become strangely stout and old," thought Nointel; "but I am almost sure it is my man. No one else has eyebrows like those. By Jove! I must set my mind at rest about it."

The carriages which had followed the hearse were beginning to pass, carrying away the women and their maids. The captain let them go, and, as soon as he had no longer any reason to fear being noticed he went boldly and seated himself at one of the tables outside the wine-shop close to the personage who so greatly mystified him. He risked little more than taking a cold, and, to attain his object, he would have braved more serious dangers.

On seeing this intruder establish himself in his immediate neighbourhood, the man drew himself up like a hedgehog which is about to roll itself into a ball to oppose its prickles to the enemy, and poured out for himself a full bumper, which he swallowed at one toss. It was brandy he was drinking in this fashion, and by the way in which he absorbed it, Nointel completely recognised him. Nothing remained but to address him, and it was necessary to make haste, for the bottle was nearly empty. Nointel commenced by knocking on the window-panes of the wine shop, and as he had learned while in garrison to talk the language of *cafés*, he asked the waiter who presented himself for a "bock." He resolved not to drink any of the beer served in this funereal neighbourhood; but he needed a pretext for remaining. The bock once brought and paid for, the captain sought a means of coming to business. The drinker turned his back to him. He had placed his elbows upon the table, and appeared to be plunged into gloomy reflections.

"Excuse me, sir," said Nointel boldly, "are you not Monsieur Crozon?"

The man started, raised his head, and replied in a tone which was barely encouraging: "Yes, that's my name. What do you wish?"

"Ah! I was sure of it! you don't recognise me?"

"No."

"What! you have forgotten that nice passage on board the 'Jérémie,' a three-master of six hundred tons, copper-bottomed and bolted, fast-sailing—a nice fraud that, the 'fast-sailing.' We took seventy days to reach Mexico."

"I was once a second officer on board the 'Jérémie,' but that was twelve years ago—and then, what are you aiming at?"

"Why, to tell you that I am Nointel, Henri Nointel, second lieutenant of the Eighth Hussars, who embarked with his squad on board your 'Jérémie,' on the 9th of December, 1866."

"Yes, yes, I remember now," said the sailor, unbending a little. "And I ought to have recognised you sooner, for you have not changed."

"Nor you either, captain—I know that you are a captain now—I had news of you from an officer who knew you at Vera Cruz, and who belongs to Havre. You command a whaling ship?"

"Since a couple of years. I arrived in port a week ago. Are you still in the service?"

"I retired after the war."

"To get married, eh?"

"Ah! no. I choose to be independent, and I shall remain a bachelor."

"You will do well," said Crozon, whose face darkened.

"Truly! is that your opinion? But it seemed to me that Fabrègue wrote me——"

"That I had married? That's true."

"He also told me that you had married a Parisian lady."

"That is also true."

"So much the better; that will perhaps induce you to live in Paris. I shall be delighted at that, for I could see you sometimes and be useful to you also. I am on my own ground in this city; I know everybody, and have a number of friends, because I never asked anything of anybody. I know that you yourself ask nothing; but after all, there are occasions in life when one may have need of a comrade, and I beg you to believe, my dear Crozon, that I am entirely devoted to you. And further, I am under obligations to you. You acted as a second for me during our stay at Havana—do you remember?"

"Against a Spanish officer—and you gave him a pretty thrust. I should think I did remember it—it was about a quadroon who sold cigars at the corner of the Calle Mayor."

"And who was mightily pretty. How old she must be by this time! But that isn't in question. When I find a good companion of my youth again, like you, I mean that he shall dispose of me in any and every way, and I hope that you will not stand upon ceremony if I can be of use to you."

Nointel had hit home. The sea-dog was touched, and it could be plainly seen on his face that his heart was beginning to open itself to confidence.

"And while waiting till you ask a service of me," continued the captain, "I hope you will come and take breakfast with me some morning. I have a certain Jamaica rum which you shall give me your opinion about."

"Thanks, my dear Nointel: just at present I go out very little—I have reasons for remaining at home."

"Good! I can guess. You are almost a bridegroom; and after a two years' campaign——"

"My wife is ill," said Crozon, bluntly.

"Then I ask your forgiveness for having joked. We will breakfast together some other day. But, since you go out so little, do you know that I was very lucky to meet you in a neighbourhood where I do not come twice a year—and where you can't come often, either."

"It is the first time I have ever set foot here."

"You would never guess what brought me here, my dear fellow. Just fancy, I was well acquainted with the woman who has just been buried——"

"And who was assassinated at the ball at the opera house," exclaimed the sailor. "Are you also acquainted with the one who killed her?"

"Good!" thought Nointel. "Here he is then, just where I wished to bring him." And he said aloud, with perfect calmness: "My faith! no, I don't know her. I was told that she was an artiste, a singer—of good birth, and well brought up, as it seems. I know nothing more."

"Of good birth and well brought up," repeated the sailor—words which the captain would have thought strange in Crozon's mouth had he been less well informed. "And is it sure that it is this creature who struck the blow?"

"As sure as can be, so long as justice has not spoken. One thing is certain—she has been arrested. Her name is Lestérel."

"Yes, Lestérel," murmured M. Crozon, who appeared to be more and more agitated.

Nointel now feigned to notice for the first time to what extent the whaleman was disturbed. "Excuse me, my dear fellow," he said to him gently, "I don't wish to be indiscreet, but it seems to me that that name makes a disagreeable impression upon you."

Instead of replying, Crozon poured himself out a large glass of brandy, and swallowed it without a grimace.

"He is drinking to give himself courage to make disclosures to me," thought the captain. "He will come to it by-and-by; provided he does not roll under the table! No, I remember his capacity. On board, he absorbed a bottle of rum a day, and didn't show it. He must have made some progress in twelve years."

Nointel also thought it necessary to encourage the inclinations to confidence which M. Crozon began to manifest, and so he decided to lay a snare into which the sea captain might throw himself. "My dear fellow," he continued, "I don't ask you for secrets; but if you take any interest whatever in the person accused of the crime at the opera house, I shall be in a position to inform you, and, perhaps, even to be useful to you, for I know the examining magistrate who is charged with following up the affair."

"I! interest myself in that hussy!" growled the sea-dog. "I wish they would suffocate her in her prison."

"The deuce! how you go on! What has she done to you, then, that you wish her to be strangled?"

Crozon uttered a sort of smothered roar, and looked so strangely, that Nointel had a deal of trouble in restraining himself from laughing in his face. "What has she done to me?" said the sea-captain in a hollow voice. "Oh, nothing; but she is my sister-in-law."

"Ah, good heavens!" exclaimed Nointel, feigning to be painfully surprised; "what! this young lady——"

"Is my wife's sister; yes, my dear comrade. Get married, if you want to be dishonoured."

"You go too far, my friend. No one would think of holding you responsible for Mademoiselle Lestérel's actions. And, besides, she is perhaps accused wrongfully; she is perhaps innocent."

"She? She is a monster of villany and hypocrisy."

"You astonish me. I had heard it said that she was esteemed in the society which she frequented—very fine society, it appears—and that she was reproached with no waywardness of conduct."

"Oh, she is deep! as deep as she is false."

"Then you had ceased seeing her?"

"No; to my misfortune. I ought to have driven her away from my

home. But I was sufficiently weak to allow her to continue visiting my wife."

"That is a misfortune—a very great misfortune—but, after all, the scandal of this trial cannot reach you. No one will know that Mademoiselle Lestérel is so closely connected with you."

"You are mistaken. The magistrate already knows it; and soon all Paris will know it. When she was arrested—when she was asked where she had passed the night, between Saturday and Sunday, she had the audacity to reply that she went to her sister's at midnight, and had remained there till three o'clock in the morning. The magistrate had my servant summoned to confront her with her, and the infamous girl had to acknowledge that she had lied. One of these days, I also shall be summoned. I am astonished that my wife has not already been called to give evidence."

"It is, in fact, hard to find one's self mixed up in such an affair, when one has always been an honest man. I pity you sincerely, my dear fellow, and I also pity Madame Crozon."

"Her! no, don't pity her," said the sailor roughly.

Nointel did not commit the mistake of asking for an explanation of this answer. He felt that his man would of his own accord reach the disclosures he longed for, and did not wish to appear desirous of provoking them.

"However," he continued, "this is a very strange story—at least, what I know of it—for I have learned it from the papers. They don't explain why Mademoiselle Lestérel killed this d'Orcival, whom she had no doubt never seen."

"An error, my dear fellow," said Crozon bitterly. "They were formerly at the same boarding-school. The cause of the crime isn't difficult to guess. A rivalry, a quarrel about a lover. Ah, look here! Nointel; when I think that I tolerated the presence of that creature in my house, I feel a desire to go and fell her accomplice, and afterwards to blow out my brains."

"I am opposed to that," exclaimed the captain, laughing. "I don't wish to lose an old comrade just as I have found him again. A man like you doesn't kill himself for women's affairs. Who is this accomplice you speak of? I read my *Figaro* this morning. It says not a word about one."

The wretched husband rested his elbows upon the table and his head in his hands. Nointel realised that the final crisis was about to declare itself, and took care not to disturb a meditation which could hardly fail to end in a complete confession. He did well. After a somewhat long pause, Crozon raised his head again, drained his glass once more, and said in the decided tone of a man who has just taken a resolution: "It is necessary that you should know all. We have not seen each other for years, but I knew you sufficiently well formerly to be sure that you are a worthy fellow, and that one can confide in you. And I have had enough of devouring my rage without having a friend to whom to tell my sorrows and ask advice of."

"Advice? Present! And what I shall give you won't be bad. I have lived here, while you were navigating; you are a sailor, I am a Parisian; your position is no doubt one in which I have found myself a dozen times. I will indicate to you the way to get out of it. It is useless to add, my dear friend, that I am entirely at your service. Do you need any money? I have about thirty thousand francs at my banker's lying

idle. Are you in search of a second to arrange a duel for you and to support you with a turn at the sword? In case of need, I'm your man."

"Thanks, Nointel, thanks," said the sailor with effusion. "I don't lack money. My last campaign in the Southern Seas alone brought me a small fortune, and I had already laid by a considerable amount. But for the rest, I accept. If I find what I am in search of, you shall be my second."

"With pleasure, my friend. You have been mine. It is my turn. Ah! so you think of having a brush with some one?"

"I will tell you presently with whom. Listen to my story, in the first place. It is a gay one, as you will see," said Crozon, laughing bitterly. "I married, as you know. Six years ago I married the eldest daughter of an officer in the army. My wife did not bring me a copper as dower. The father only had his pension, and died six months after the wedding. But Mathilde was charming, and I was insanely in love. Mustn't I have been stupid to believe that an old porpoise like myself could ever please a girl fifteen years younger than I was, and who had been brought up to marry a prince! I was smitten, however, and it was the first time this had happened to me. You knew me at the time of the 'Jérémie,' and you know how I behaved towards women. My relations with them never lasted longer than the stay of my ship, and two hours after sailing I thought no more about them. I made fun of the comrades on board who were sentimental. Well, it was written above that after all I was to be caught like the others. I was married then, felt happier than a king, and all went well at first. Mathilde acted well towards me, and I made every effort to please her. I but half succeeded in doing so, because she wished many things I was unable to give her; still, in fact, she didn't complain, but rendered me happy. Her great sorrow was not having any children, and, to console herself, she played mamma with her little sister, who had just left boarding-school. It would take too long to tell you all we did to put this younger sister in a condition to earn her living honestly. She had teachers of all kinds; singing-lessons at twenty francs apiece. All we could spare went in that way."

"And it is this young sister who——"

"Who has just assassinated that woman? yes, my friend; but it is not of her that I wish to talk to you. She will be condemned; she will finish on the scaffold or in a prison with thieves; so much the better! I shall suffer no longer through her. Hear the rest. I loved Mathilde so much that I, who used to care no more for money than I do for a pipeful of tobacco, only thought of earning it. We had enough to live on, and I might have loitered on shore six months in the year, but I began looking out for productive and hazardous voyages. I made two campaigns in the Chinese waters, almost following each other—two fortunate voyages, which brought me in considerable profits. My wife conducted herself very well during these two long absences; but on my return from the last one, she gave me to understand that we were not yet sufficiently rich. I adored her as I had done the first day—more than on the first day. Why? I don't know. A creature who merely breathed, who had no health, no gaiety, nothing which can please a sailor. Ah! I think she had bewitched me. To bring her back the fortune she was ambitious for, I determined to go away once more. I took command of a whaling ship for an owner at Havre. I knew that it was a hard and dangerous business, but that with good luck one might make money by it. And, in fact, I did have a superb

campaign. It is true that I risked my skin nearly every day. I got caught in the ice ; I came twice near being lost on coral reefs. But I had been through many dangers before, and then I thought of Mathilde. I said to myself : Now she will have what she has so much wished for—a free and easy life. Finally, after a last cruise in the waters of Japan, I complete my full cargo of oil and make for San Francisco on my way to France. It was there misfortune awaited me.”

“What ! at three thousand leagues from Paris ?”

“On going ashore, I found a letter addressed to me—a letter in which I was plainly told as follows : ‘Your wife deceives you. She has a lover and shows herself publicly with him. Hasten your return to stop the scandal which threatens to be followed with consequences. On your arrival, the friend who warns you will furnish you with proofs.’”

“And this was not signed ?”

“No, but—”

“And you believed in the infamies invented by an anonymous slanderer ?”

“At first I did not believe them. I suffered horribly, but did not yet despair. Mathilde had also written to me, and her letter was neither more nor less tender than the others. I had the courage not to leave my ship, and the foolishness to inform my wife that I should arrive in France before the end of February. A week ago, on stepping ashore at Havre, I received another letter——”

“Anonymous like the other one ?”

“Yes, but containing more precise details. I was informed that my wife had been abandoned by her lover, but that their connection had resulted in—a child.”

“The deuce !” said Nointel, shaking his head.

“A child which was born a month ago, and which its mother had spirited away.”

“An infanticide !”

“Unfortunately, no. It would have been better if the wretch had ridden herself of this bastard. I should not be obliged to kill it. But she hides it—she was confined clandestinely, away from her home—but I shall find it, and I swear to you that I will do justice to the mother and the child. You perhaps think that I have delayed avenging myself too long. Listen again ; listen to the end, and you will understand why I hate this Berthe Lestérel. After having read the second letter, I could no longer control myself. I stayed but two hours at Havre, just long enough to see the owner of my vessel, and I came to Paris by the first train. My wife was on her guard. She had sent her housekeeper to await me at the station. I did not give the woman time to go and warn her mistress, but fell like a bomb into my wife’s presence. I there found——”

“The lover ?”

“If I had found him, either he or I would be dead. I there found my sister-in-law, who had no doubt expressly come to help her accomplice to throw dust in my eyes. I broke out into reproaches and threats. My wife did not reply to me. Indeed, she pretended to be dying. The other took her defence ; she cried aloud that Mathilde was innocent, that I was crazy. I still believed in the honour of this girl, Berthe, so——”

“Excuse me, if I interrupt you, my dear comrade. At the time this scene commenced, did you already know the lover’s name ?”

“No, nor do I know it yet. But I shall know it this evening.”

"This evening!" exclaimed Nointel, who was much more interested in this news than in M. Crozon's matrimonial misfortunes. "You are sure that you will know this man's name this evening?"

"Perfectly sure," replied the sailor, coldly. "I will tell you presently why I am sure of it. Let me first finish my narrative. I defied Berthe to swear that her sister was innocent. But she took the oath, the infamous girl. She swore on her honour—a fine guarantee, truly. And I was fool enough to believe in this oath. I retracted, I wept—yes, I wept—and asked my wife's pardon for having suspected her. What do you think of my weakness, Nointel?"

"I think, my friend, that if I had been in your place, I should have done the same. And I add that it isn't proved to me that you had any reason to believe in a fault committed by Madame Crozon. To my mind, an anonymous letter is not worthy of being treated seriously. To condemn a woman, there should be other proofs than the statements of a scoundrel. How do you know that this correspondent is not an enemy who is anxious to trouble your household, a rogue who tried to offer your wife his attentions, and now takes revenge for her disdain?"

"It is impossible. He has promised to make himself known to me."

"Good! but until he does so, you ought to doubt what he advances; and, if you were to consult me, I should advise you not to precipitate matters till you know something for certain."

"Oh! I have been patient. I have endured the torments of hell for a week, and have done nothing. After the scene in which the two women deceived me so odiously, Mathilde, who was already very poorly—you know why—fell, or feigned to fall, seriously ill. At each moment she was seized with frightful nervous attacks—I did not leave her, and my sister-in-law left her but little. I no longer mistrusted that wretched Berthe. And, nevertheless, I from time to time surprised between her and Mathilde an exchange of glances, signs which ought to have enlightened me. The day following my arrival a strange incident, among others, took place before me. My wife was in bed, and her sister was reading the newspaper to her. When the account of the suicide of that foreigner, whom I don't know, at Julia d'Orcival's was reached, Mathilde was taken with a very violent fit. I did not then notice this coincidence, but I remembered it later on."

"I shall remember it also," thought the captain.

"Things went on thus during the whole week," continued the sailor, "I not leaving my wife's bedside, and Berthe coming to our residence several times a day. On Saturday I received a letter from my anonymous correspondent. It was the first since my arrival in Paris. He told me that he was on the track of the child that Mathilde had hidden; that he would warn me as soon as he had found it, which could not be long, and that he would inform me at the same time of the lover's name."

"Really, my dear Crozon, I am tempted to believe that this man is deriding you with his denunciations in several instalments. You perhaps have to deal with a madman. Have you kept these letters?"

"Yes. I will show them to you; but listen to what follows. I again fell into terrible perplexities after having read this new notice; but I still believed it a calumny. That night my sister-in-law was invited to a *soirée*, she was to come and see Mathilde at midnight. She did not come, and I perceived that my wife was greatly worried. Judge, then, what I felt the next day when our housekeeper, who to my great surprise had been sum-

moned to the Palais de Justice, informed us that Berthe had been arrested and was accused of having killed a woman at the ball at the opera house—of having killed her with a poniard fan which I had brought her back from Japan——”

“What! it was you who had made her a present of that murderous gimcrack? People talk about it everywhere.”

“Yes, it is a fatality, for this unfortunate girl cannot deny her crime. Such a poniard isn’t to be found here. I realised at once that she was lost. Mathilde also realised it. She fainted away and remained for two hours between life and death. Since she has been in a condition to talk, I have tried several times to get her to tell me what she thinks of her sister’s affair. I have not been able to draw a word from her about it. She cries, but does not reply to any questions. She has good reasons for being silent. What took place between Berthe and that Julia d’Orcival? Why did she assassinate her? What does it matter to me? I know that she is guilty, and that she lied to me when she swore that her sister had never been unfaithful to me. I do not believe in the oath of a woman who assassinates. And now, I am sure of my fact. My wife has had a lover, and given birth to a bastard. Can you imagine, my dear Nointel, what I have suffered? Yesterday, I thought I was going to die of despair; this morning, I left the house and walked straight before me, not knowing where I went. Chance brought me here just as this d’Orcival’s funeral procession entered the cemetery. On seeing the hussies in their furbelows following the hearse, I suspected the thing, and made inquiries. In the crowd nothing was talked of but the crime at the opera house, and the name of Lestérel was in every mouth. Then I was seized with rage, and seated myself here to drink. I hoped that brandy would make me forget my sorrows. I was mistaken. It is long since I had the consolation of finding forgetfulness at the bottom of a bottle. Just as you spoke to me, I was asking myself if I should not do as well to finish with it and go and throw myself into the Seine instead of returning home. That’s my condition, my dear comrade—I, who have navigated all the salt water of the globe, think of drowning myself in fresh water; and when I reflect that it is a woman who has brought me to this, I wish they could all be struck by lightning.”

“You go too far, my dear fellow,” said Nointel, gently. “Women have their good qualities, and I confess that without them existence would have no charm for me. The thing is not to ask of them what they cannot give us, and not to take too seriously to heart the sorrow they may cause us. That is why, if you would permit me to give an opinion on your case, I should tell you that, even admitting that your wife has had a lover, which does not seem to me proved, it is a misfortune which it is necessary to have the courage to endure. Opinion has changed since Molière’s time. Deceived husbands no longer cause laughter, and an honest man is no longer dishonoured because it has pleased a trifling woman to forget her duty.”

“Yes,” replied the sailor ironically, “I know that the style has changed. Husbands are no longer insulted on the stage, neither are they derided openly, especially when it is known that they are not of the humour to let themselves be scoffed at. But it isn’t ridicule I fear. If I had made a prudent marriage, and that marriage had turned out badly, I should have commenced by giving a lesson to the first jeerer who fell under my hand; perhaps I should even have thought myself obliged to plant a good sword-thrust in the lover’s ribs; and after that I should have left my wife to her

favourite, have returned to my business as a sailor, and have quickly consoled myself in navigating."

"What prevents you from taking that wise course?"

"You don't understand, then, that I passionately loved this creature; that for six years I have only lived for her. You don't understand that I love her still? It is shameful—it is dastardly, but it is so. I despise her, I hate her, and I adore her. If I did not adore her, do you imagine I should think of killing her? What would it matter to me if she belonged to another, if I felt indifferent towards her? But this unworthy love is deeply rooted," said Crozon, striking his breast, "and to tear it away, it would be necessary to tear out my heart. You are strong, you are, Nointel; you have never doted upon one of these puppets, who take all from us, even our energy and our honour. You don't know what it is to say to yourself constantly, night and day: 'There is a man who possesses her; she only lives for this man; she is his, body and soul; she has sacrificed her honour to him; and at a sign from him she would leave me without pity, she would follow him without remorse.' If you had passed through such a terrible trial, I swear to you that you would not advise me to be resigned. I will not forgive—I can no longer forgive; I have suffered too much. All those by whom I have suffered must be punished. When that is accomplished, it will cost me little to die, for it is not living to exist as I do. Fortunately, the day of vengeance has arrived."

"My dear comrade," said Nointel, without becoming excited, "I shall have some objections to present to you when you arrive at unravelling this fatal affair. Oh! reassure yourself! I shall not use set phrases; I shall merely try to show you the inconvenience which the adoption of violent measures presents. But on what do you found the certainty of immediate vengeance? Has your anonymous correspondent been up to some more of his pranks?"

"I received another letter from him yesterday. He informs me that he has not yet been able to discover the whereabouts of the child, but that to-morrow he will inform me of the name of the lover—to-morrow, that is to-day, and before to-night I shall know whom to attack."

"Good! but I suppose that it isn't your plan to poniard that lover. Such ways as those must be left to the Spaniards."

"I will do him the honour to fight with him, and I will kill him; I will answer for that."

"I know you are expert with the sword."

"With all weapons. You will fix the conditions of the duel as you think best. I hold to one thing only, that is to finishing it promptly. I am going home. If I find the letter there, I will bring it to you immediately, and I shall beg of you to go at once and see this man, so that we may be able to fight to-morrow morning."

"Very well. I will be at the club from four till five, and shall probably return there at about midnight. I live at No. 125 Rue d'Anjou. Here is my card. Dispose of me at any time of the day or night. My club is that of your compatriot and friend, Fabrègue, on the Boulevard des—"

"I know, I once went there to look for him during my last stay in Paris."

"There is but one thing which troubles me. This letter you expect will give you a name; very good. But, all the same, it will be necessary to assure one's-self that the letter doesn't lie. You cannot oblige a gentleman

to fight a duel solely on account of an anonymous denunciation. Besides, the lover will deny it. A man of honour never makes an acknowledgment in such cases."

"I will force him to do so."

"Hem! if you propose to tear a confession from him by violence, I ought to tell you that I should have to beg you to relieve me from my functions as a second. Brutalities of that kind seem to me altogether in bad taste, and, besides, they would operate against your object."

"So be it! I will leave the matter entirely with you."

"And you will do well, my dear Crozon. I know Paris, and as soon as I am informed of the so-called lover's name, I shall perhaps be in a position to tell you if confidence can be placed in your spy's declaration—for he is a spy, this correspondent who denounces women—or if he has made a false accusation. I suppose, of course, that he will be a man of society, or, at least, a man who can be taken for an adversary without degrading one's-self."

"I would fight with a convict, if that convict had been my wife's lover," said the sailor, coldly.

"I hope you will not be reduced to that extremity," replied Nointel, smiling. "But I do not in the least suspect with whom we shall have to deal."

The captain, in talking thus, said the contrary of the truth, for he now very strongly suspected that Golymine had been Madame Crozon's lover, and he would have been delighted to have the letter awaited by the unfortunate husband confirm his suspicions; in the first place, as, Golymine being no longer of this world, the duel would become impossible; and secondly, and more especially, as this would fit in wonderfully well with the system of defence he was gradually preparing in Mademoiselle Lestérel's interest.

"That would not prove that she didn't kill Julia," he thought, "but all the same, Darcy would feel very glad if I could demonstrate to him that the amorous correspondence was from the sister, and that Mademoiselle Berthe simply went to the ball to save Madame Crozon's honour."

For the moment the question was exhausted. The bottle of brandy also. The whaleman had drained it, and without the least stumbling, he carried this ration of alcohol which would have stretched an ordinary drinker upon the ground. But it had not calmed him; quite the contrary, for when he rose Nointel read an implacable resolution in his eyes.

They shook hands and separated; Crozon giving utterance to these parting words: "I will see you shortly, comrade. I rely on you."

Nointel watched him as he walked down the boulevard with a firm step, and then called a cab to take him to the club. It was not yet time for him to present himself at the marchioness's, and he had nothing better to do than to continue his quest for news by chatting with the idlers of the club. "This seaman is a terrible fellow," he said to himself as he got into the cab, "and I shall have to watch him closely to prevent him from putting one or two murders upon his conscience. But I should like very much to know who is the cowardly scoundrel who has denounced his wife. And I shall know it, perhaps. The whaleman has promised to show me the letters he has received."

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